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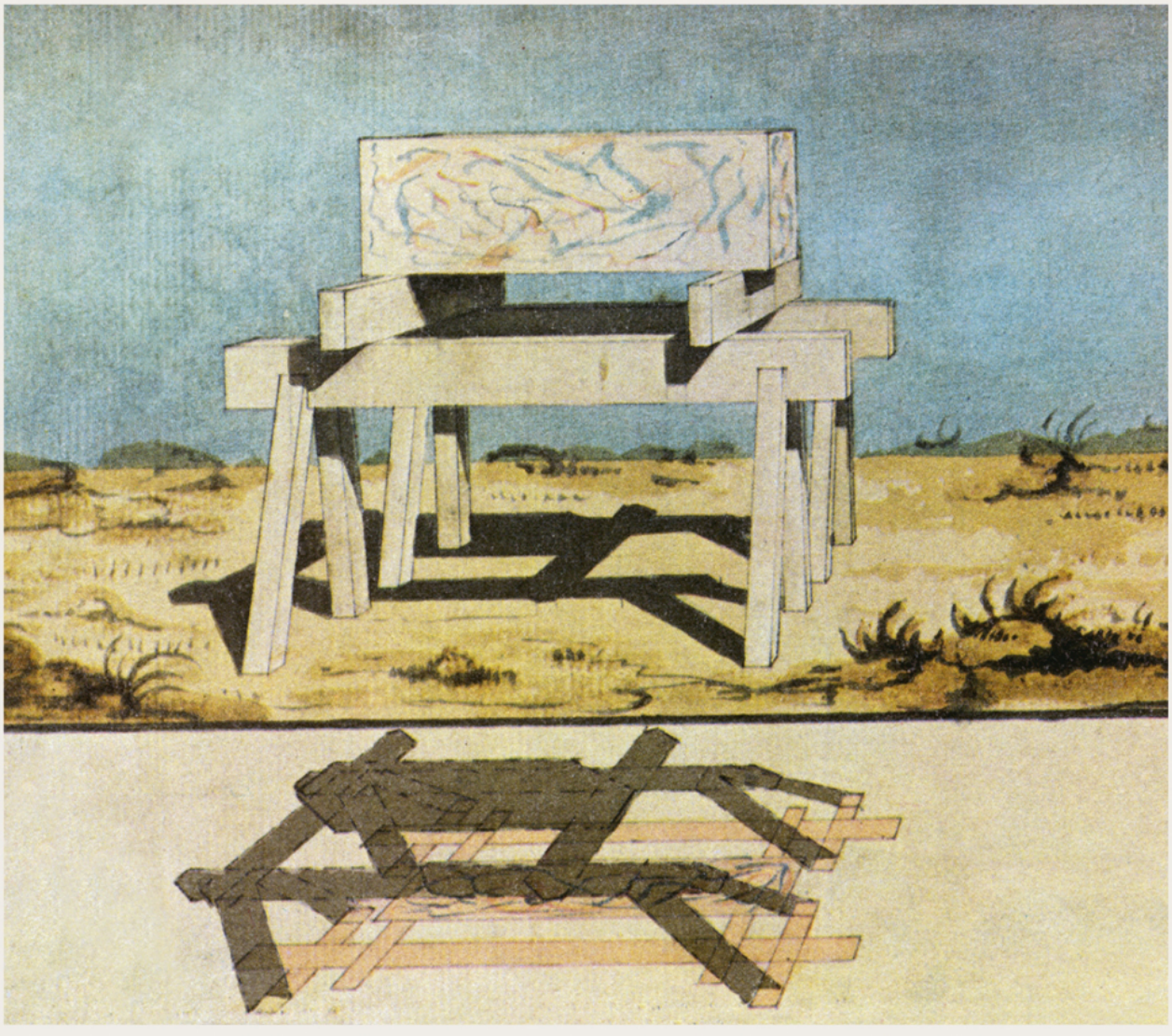
THE NEW YORK TIMES

ROBERTO CALASSO

THE RUIN OF KASCH



Roberto Calasso

THE RUIN OF KASCH

Translated from the Italian by Richard Dixon

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PENGUIN BOOKS

THE RUIN OF KASCH

Born in Florence, Roberto Calasso lives in Milan, where he is publisher of Adelphi Edizioni. He is the author of an ongoing series of books which began with *The Ruin of Kasch* and includes *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony, Ka, K., Tiepolo Pink, La Folie Baudelaire* and *Ardor.*

In the beginning the mountains had great wings. They flew through the sky and landed on the earth as they pleased. Then the earth trembled and shook. Indra chopped off the mountains' wings. He fastened the mountains to the earth to make it stable. The wings became clouds. From then, the clouds gather around the peaks.

TALLEYRAND: I speak at the opening of this book because I was the last person familiar with ceremonies. I also speak, as always, to deceive. This book is not dedicated to me, nor to anyone else. This book is dedicated to dedication.

"Monsieur de Talleyrand is a difficult man to follow around the *meanderings* of his political life," said the Duchesse d'Abrantès as she opened the doors of the *Salon de M. de Talleyrand*.[1] At the entrance, the delicious stuccoes of the ancien régime. By the exit, the bourgeois dining room. At the center, the hypnotic beasts of the Empire stare at us from armchairs. And in rooms to the side we greet the guillotine and the American forests. Toward the far end, a Congress stumbles in the trails of its dances. From every corner Prince Talleyrand's *mots* echo among the guests. A delicate tom-tom, an instrument heard for the first time at Mirabeau's funeral, sounds them out through the meanderings, *billets-doux* along the way. *Mots* retold many times over, almost never by the Prince himself, who was so lazy about writing. He entrusted certain terrible truths to the instant of a reply, threw them into the bustle of conversation, risking each time that they might not be picked up. But Talleyrand, who had seen it all, even before he had set off on his journey, always kept a magnanimous faith in at least one thing: in society as a resonant salon, where each time there would be at least one hidden ear to catch what he said. And so those *mots*, bound up in balsamic bandages, would be passed down over the years as if they were a set of folio volumes. Certain aristocrats, in old age, tend to resemble their servants. Here the Great Chamberlain will gradually become a simple master of ceremonies, keeper of a house of ghosts, tour guide. The meanderings of his life and of his salon will become the context for a cruel performance repeated over and again, though in changeable sequences, in place of the myth that society had forgotten to repeat.

In the salons that softly, tenderly surrounded the Congress of Vienna for one last time, the conversations heard in window recesses and immediately

noted down by the secret police didn't just concern amorous intrigues and what the history books would call the new balance of Europe. One question arose before every other and behind every other: that of transforming once and for all the *ṛta*, the articulation between heaven and earth that makes life possible and gives it order. It had all begun one day, when the gods, tired perhaps of the solid, opaque primordial turmoil, "wished: 'What can we do to separate these worlds of ours a little further?[2] How can we have more space?' And then they breathed into those worlds, uttering the three syllables 'vī-ta-ye,' and the worlds distanced themselves from each other and there was more space for the gods." And, later, for human beings. It was certainly no longer appropriate to talk about it now. Indeed no one had any clear memory of it. And yet there was still a pressing need to resolve one family matter that harked back to *ṛta*: legitimizing Legitimacy as its heir. There was a certain embarrassment when talking about Law. But the true word of the moment was the other one: Legitimacy—and the person to grasp this could only be Talleyrand, the man who had always kept a discreet distance from the law. The step was enormous, and therefore needed to be sensed as little as possible, it had to be submerged beneath the surface of society balls and tiresome dynastic (sometimes domestic) quarrels. Legitimacy was the least reassuring word, a picnic among grassy ruins. But hidden behind legitimacy was another word, another realm: the realm of Convention, which was finally leading to absolute power. Until then, Convention had been the eternal cadet branch of the psyche, its power had constantly grown in an unnamable shadow, precisely because it had no legitimacy. In order to become legitimate, it would have to drain legitimacy and dress in its clothes. Now it needed to be recognized effectively, while command was given to facts. This had clearly been reached through political necessity. With the Russian campaign, Napoleon had stirred the ghost of unlimited war, attracted by the land that in itself evokes limitlessness, uncontrollability, hopeless turmoil, Europe's exit from itself, far from civilization and its *douceur*. That same limitlessness was already about to show itself in Europe: a diplomatic euphemism would call it "the social question." The moment had therefore come to give authority to the only power that promised to negotiate on equal terms with the limitless, perhaps even to grasp hold of it (though few at that time were sure about that): Convention as Legitimacy. Time would tell, it would bleach the bones of meaning. Pol Pot and his men roamed the jungle between Thailand and

Cambodia. For most of the surrounding world, he was still his country's sole legitimate authority. The temples turned upside down by his sovereign rule stretched into large numbers of mass graves, dug deep into the ground. The layers of those dead bodies epitomize our own Canonical Phases: the corpses at the lowest level reveal scraps of colored clothing and are the followers of Lon Nol (the ancien régime); they are followed, higher up, by the Buddhist monks (refractory priests); then various civilians (the Public Safety police turn against anyone); and finally the dark rags of the Khmer Rouge themselves (the true Jacobins, the true Bolsheviks, conspirators and renegades). Grave diggers heaped piles of skulls into the forms that Cambodian peasants had used from times immemorial to stack their annual pineapple harvest. In the face of mass graves, history returns to being natural history.

DUCHESSE D'ABRANTÈS: When did we all start wearing masks? Let me think … yes, it was before I'd been let out into society, and my sharp-toothed cousins paid me a visit and told me everything … those were the reckless years of the Directory, when purple togas packaged in England were seized at customs … when Bonaparte was received at the Palais Luxembourg by five Directors with plumed hats, dressed in cloaks covered with arabesques and cut in medieval style—yes, they were not yet resolved on Roman Virtue … pale with anxiety before the General whom the sublime Ossian held suspended two inches above the ground … said our dear friend, ours, and everyone's perennial traitor—Talleyrand, the only one to have succeeded in betraying everything, apart from style … and certainly not out of delicacy but because style is the golden scepter that is ultimately revered by a vast part of this world, and some other … Like a camp of dazed nomads, among pieces of cloth robbed from innocent travelers, this was Paris at that time … Everyone dreamed of the Court, but memories of the correct gestures were already starting to fade … the Directors represented the people, but that was not enough … though still representing someone, they were rather like salesmen setting off to invade the provinces by stagecoach … with their new price lists …

An irrepressible tropism turns the spirit toward Talleyrand: "Once, during my youth, and even later, when I used to love adventure stories and

melodramas, I realized that what fascinated me was *uncertainty about people's identity*."[3] How can we not experience it over that mask that many called deathly or impenetrable or impassive, while just as many have attributed to it all kinds of infamy and the most unexpected virtues? A mask that had watched over the whole murky course of the Canonical Phases, which themselves had doubtful identities: they did not know, they would never know, whether to consider themselves lucky or unlucky, all marked *niveis atrisque lapillis*. In the end the only thing that could be said was what Léon Bloy noted in his usual blunt manner: "Evidently God no longer knew what to do about that old world.[4] He wanted new things, and someone like Napoleon was needed to set them going." Apart from such harsh certainty, the whole was unstable, and then the outlines of a physiognomy offered themselves as a last mainstay. But there again, all knowledge is physiognomic.

Johann Kasper Lavater, the last savant of physiognomy, asked young Goethe to help him on his *Physiognomische Fragmente.* Wasn't he perhaps already convinced about the "general homogeneity of every formation of nature"?[5] Of course, replied Goethe—and his contribution to Lavater's work would indeed be pressed further. For him, even objects, clothing, environments were part of physiognomic science: "Nature forms mankind, and mankind is transformed, and such transformation, in turn, is natural; he who finds himself standing in the midst of the vast world creates another world within him, a small world enclosed and protected by walls, and furbished in his image."[6]

Over fifty years later, the old Goethe found himself leafing through the *Collection des portraits historiques de M. le baron Gérard*, published by Urbain Canel in Paris, 1826. They were etchings of somewhat doubtful quality that Monsieur Pierre Adam had made from those sumptuous portraits scattered around Europe. Goethe's friend Boisserée complained, during one visit, about the crudeness of the execution. "My dear boy," replied Goethe, "we, in our Weimar modesty, are content with such things.[7] You are too refined and difficult to please." Goethe spent much time studying those etchings alone. Art was not the point, he was following a physiognomic dream of his own. Leafing through the album, his eye fell on a man he had known on that now famous day at Erfurt, sitting to the right of Napoleon (who had made that embarrassing remark: "Voilà un homme!").

Studying the portrait of Talleyrand, he wrote: “The more we proceed to contemplate this collection, the more important it seems to us.” And yet, in commenting on the portraits of Alexander I, Charles X, and Louis Philippe d’Orléans, his words of appreciation were amiably generic. Only in front of Talleyrand do we feel him sinking into that obscure contemplative stillness from which his finest pages emerge: “Here before us we have the prime diplomat of the century. He sits in perfect stillness and calmly awaits all the circumstances of the moment. Sitting in a room that is most dignified, though not ostentatious, we find him wearing simple and appropriate court dress, his plumed hat on the couch just behind him, as if this *homme d’affaires* is awaiting the call that his carriage is ready to take him to a meeting; his left arm resting on the corner of the table, beside it papers and quills, his right arm in his lap, his right leg crossed over his left, and he appears to us perfectly impassive. We cannot but recall the gods of Epicurus, who live ‘where it does not rain and does not snow nor does the tempest ever blow’; such is the calmness of this man, untouched by the storms that hiss around him. One can understand how he manages to assume such an appearance, but not how he can maintain it. His gaze is quite impenetrable; he looks ahead, but it is doubtful whether he sees those who are looking at him. His gaze is not looking inward, like that of someone who is thinking, nor is it looking outward, like someone who is watching; his gaze rests in and on himself, like his whole figure, which suggests not exactly self-satisfaction, but certainly some lack of connection with the outside.

“But that’s enough, here we can play physiognomists and interpreters as much as we wish, in any case our understanding will prove too short, our experience too poor, our imagination too limited to give us an adequate idea of such a being.[8] It is likely that the same will happen for future historians, who can see to what extent this picture of ours will be of assistance to them.”

Concealed in that review that was so superfluous, so marginal for the eighty-year-old Goethe, who still had to complete his Great Work, which remained suspended among the archetypes (and it was essential for him, the systematic and complete being, not to leave it in a fragmentary state), the lines on Talleyrand pointed to a cautious revelation by the Dichter about himself. Goethe, too, knew the art of concealing everything on the surface.

An album of engravings of famous people—where the clamor of history is frozen, where looks already tend to dull, as in later illustrations in the *Magasin pittoresque*—provided an appropriate occasion for someone who purported to be an "occasional poet." And it was precisely there, rather than in some conversation with Eckermann or other devoted ear, that Goethe had chosen to refer to that long parallel life that had accompanied him in the land of turmoil. After all, he and Talleyrand were the only two beings of absolute significance who had survived it all, from the earliest years of skating and boudoirs up to that dignified, ceremonious, and misunderstood old age. The old age of one who knows too much. Goethe had already taken on the guise of the Grosser Dichter while Talleyrand, at Valençay, received Honoré de Balzac, a writer consumed with curiosity who looked upon him as an ancient, impressive, and delicate kind of lizard; or, worse still, he received the rambunctious George Sand and her band (and Madame de Dino, at the Prince's side as always, noted: "All in all, very little charm; and the rest of the company totally ordinary").[9]

In that passage Goethe was sending out a stern warning: don't fool yourselves—you scholars—into thinking you understand Talleyrand's gaze, don't fool yourselves into thinking you understand the polished serenity of the old councillor Goethe. And the game went as far as provocation. Goethe, the "Olympian," as Germanic kitsch would repeatedly describe him, even resorted to the "gods of Epicurus" to get closer to Talleyrand's gaze. And yet he must have known that, according to general rumor, that gaze had witnessed almost every possible villainy—and some even of his own making.

The suggested superimposition of the two impassive faces, implied by Goethe, would soon be recognized and declared. Sainte-Beuve—who understood almost everything and tried not to make it too conspicuous—wrote a few lines in this respect in the note introducing the works of Molière, in one of the most attractive *illustrés romantiques* with the vignettes of Tony Johannot, published by Paulin in Rue de Seine, Paris, in 1835 (Talleyrand still alive, Goethe recently dead): "And nonetheless his [Molière's] lucidity, his customary coolness of character, at the center of such a lively work, did not lead in the slightest to cold and calculated impartiality, as has been seen in Goethe, the Talleyrand of art: such critical refinements had not yet been invented in poetry at that time."[10] These, once again, are lines tucked away along the margin so that they are barely

apparent. But they were noticed by the sour and irrepressible Barbey d'Aurevilly, who didn't miss the opportunity of voicing his lordly disdain for Sainte-Beuve's babouches ("Sainte-Beuve disliked argument, it made his ears turn purple, and his sharp tongue would blabber in anger and spite …")—and he made it seem like a gratuitous intuition: "Sainte-Beuve once had a flash of inspiration, and called Goethe a literary Talleyrand, today he regrets that correct idea."[11, 12] But at that point he, Barbey, weighed in with his sword: "The *poseur* that Goethe may not have been by nature, but which his admirers had made of him through their excessive admiration, carefully concealed the emptiness of his being beneath his Olympian air, just as Talleyrand, who was no less vacuous, concealed his own beneath the indolent, mocking pose of the supercilious lord who *had seen a great deal more* …

"Indeed, there is a great similarity between Goethe and Talleyrand, these two princely souls![13] Goethe is a literary Talleyrand, dressed up in his cravat like Talleyrand. Except that, even though he wore the famous cravat that had to be knotted eighteen times, Goethe did not have the impertinence with which Talleyrand held his head, with the semi-closed eye of a charmer, the eye of the languishing viper, since these are spontaneous and natural things that Talleyrand had—gifts of God or of the devil!—whereas nothing is spontaneous and natural in Goethe, this operatic actor, always in front of a mirror …"

How did the Revolution find Talleyrand? "He loved the worldly life of the old days, as a man of his situation and quality could live it: he had a passion for women, gambling and everything that made a man fashionable at that time, and it was thus that 1789 found Monsieur de Talleyrand."[14] It also found him with an abnormal gift for discerning how times were moving. And in it lay his entire political intelligence. "The benefits he enjoyed would have been taken from him by the force of events; and, in his opinion, it was better to abandon them beforehand (I always say 'perhaps')." In the irony of her "perhaps," the Duchesse d'Abrantès refers to one of the rare characteristics that can certainly be attributed to Talleyrand.[15] To sniff out the times, a beast in the boudoir. The aristocratic choice of giving what a moment later would be snatched away ("only one course remained: to yield before being forced into doing so, and while credit could still be gained for it").[16] A Talleyrand cannot accept that

something is to be snatched from him: but he'll accept that he can give everything away. Especially if what he is giving is a *Gift*-gift, a poisoned gift, something that he privately hates: ecclesiastical privileges, for example, which were the mark of an occupation (the occupation of bishop) into which he had been forced by his parents' innate tyranny. By giving those revenues and privileges to the nation he was reaping revenge on the demonic aspect of the nobility—its unassailable whim—to which he had been compelled to submit from birth.

Behind the welter of facts, behind the conspiracies and betrayals, we also find the stubborn loyalty of Talleyrand. Certain perceptions of him seem to have been permanently fixed, and nothing of what later happened would undermine them. First, the early awareness that the age of bouleversements and upheavals, in short the "age of revolutions," had begun; that every movement from then on would be a ripple in the current—and that this demanded an adequate and lasting change in all methods of action.[17] Certain symbols of power would be ludicrously impotent from then on; whereas certain other gestures (such as the ball that Talleyrand gave for Madame Bonaparte at Hôtel Galliffet on January 3, 1798) were more decisive than battles. Second: that the *summum bonum*, the supersensible sun of political action, would no longer be to hinder or exacerbate that turmoil (brute childishness in both cases), but to soften the blow, coating the rough edges with lenitive, residual douceurs, wrapping them in noble gauzes abandoned in the attics. And above all *removing faith* from the turmoil, not attributing that *plus* that it always claims to represent: in short, not to believe that slaughter could be easily transformed into sacrifice. Without a liturgy, people were moving about in a vast slaughterhouse.

"*Tat tvam asi—this you are*": those words that open the doors of the cosmos and of the mind, the assumption of all vedantic assumptions, are not, after all, so eccentric in regard to ordinary life.[18] Certainly no more eccentric than Descartes's *ego cogito*. But the civilized West, the eighteenth century that held the stage, seems to be separated by a sheet of lead from all that might turn attention to *ātman-brahman.* Hermetism continues to proliferate, but is now resigned to its role in secret sects, preparing the way for spiritualism. And, if anything, it loves getting involved in dark political intrigues that end up as a distraction from contemplation. *Clarté* teaches first of all not to see certain things. The important point—as Descartes

insisted—is to draw the boundaries, to vanquish the limitless psyche, let the mind run loose in its own glittering golden cage. But there are also geological events that accompany history. In this case the emergence of a new wild continent within Europe: Germany. Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* is a posthumous tribute to that emergence, which had taken place under the banner of the Romantik. "India ended up becoming Germany," observed Victor Hugo in front of the shadow plays that marbled the "wall of the centuries."[19, 20] Every civilization needs to nurture its own Orient within itself. When the first notes of the romantic piano sounded, Europe found its own Orient in this penetrating sound—an Orient that it had long tried to lose.

Talleyrand's role above all was that of master of ceremonies—but this was an age where ceremonies had lost their meaning, an age that claimed it could do without them, while it stumbled at every step. At that point Talleyrand *offered his arm*, impassively—and helped find a way out of the embarrassment. But what ought to have caused alarm was his distant gaze when proffering help. For decades, apart from the searing interlude of the Terror, Talleyrand had constantly sought to ensure that History—grievous, bloody, and awkward in its successive guises—would be passable in society. He had made the government of parvenus passable in society, the demimonde in power for the first time, with the Directory. And almost forty years later, at the age of eighty, in London, he ensured that the government of the bourgeoisie, in power for the first time under their declared names—lawyers and merchants, no longer citizens—was passable in society. From his point of view, History seemed marked by a progressive decline. But it was still necessary to help it glide smoothly along its tracks. Talleyrand felt a justified horror at the sudden flounderings of History, at its paroxysms. And so he sought to put a few drops of oil into the workings, waiting for others to throw in sand. Talleyrand foresaw it, he knew it, he had already seen it: and it would happen repeatedly. But he continued all the same: *glissez*, *glissez*, in the end something will remain. A gesture, at least.

M***: The Napoleonic Court is established in the equatorial forest, theocracy is found among merchants at the bazaar, Lenin has put on a parachute uniform, smokes Davidoff cigars, the Holy Experiments are circling the rice fields with corpses. It is increasingly apparent that the

> future political scene is the Africa of Raymond Roussel. And now we will also be obliged to rediscover many things that zeal had sought to eradicate: ideas were once thought important—now they are lined up before us like dented Coca-Cola cans. We used to think that the prime requisite was a general knowledge ("The Evil of the World is Ignorance" was the last banner, gnostic as always, of conquering commonplaces)—and we realize that all education is magnetized by something silent and implied, whereas explicit education alone sounds shrill and hideous, like Racine recited in a penitentiary for the director's birthday. *Expressa nocent.* What is said can damage.

Talleyrand has never inspired respect. From when he was a young "abbé mauvais sujet" until his dying hours, he is the butt of insult, condemnation, sarcasm, and curses.[21] For decades he is laughed at for being lame. Chateaubriand wrote of Talleyrand: "Since much scorn was heaped upon him, he had imbibed it and had placed it at the two drooping corners of his mouth."[22] His mother implores Louis XVI not to appoint him bishop since he is unworthy of the cloth. As a bishop he has to defend himself from more secular accusations (gambling, speculation, women). As foreign minister under the Directory, the same Directors who had chosen him flatly despise him, and Jean-François Rewbell continually repeated, "Talleyrand was the assembly of all scourges, the prototype of betrayal as of corruption.[23] He is a powdered lackey of the ancien régime: at most he might be useful as a servant, to be put on display, if he had more leg; but his legs are defective, like his heart." The newspapers want to flay him, and they find plenty of material for doing so. And one day, at last, even the Emperor's fury will be brought down on him. At that moment Napoleon actually wants to strike Talleyrand, for once at least he would like to shatter his impassivity, and he resorts to the most ridiculous and offensive gesture; he takes Talleyrand by the chin, pushing him against the wall. Thus he, too, finds the occasion for a famous *mot*: "You are shit in a silk stocking." But right-minded loathing of Talleyrand culminates with the romantics: Chateaubriand, George Sand, Hugo. Devoted to the Ideal, each of them wants to give Talleyrand an eloquent kick, as if to a stray dog, in an age that no longer belongs to him, but to them. Here the moral bugles sound, indignation is projected on vast wings into the future; it includes all future fathers, speaks in the name of all young people of noble aspiration. And then, for anyone of eminence in the

world of literature, Talleyrand is such a rich pretext for a piece of scurrilous virtuosity. It is like a contest between Alexandrian orators: who could best fashion their disdain for Talleyrand, who could write it in the sky as a new constellation of words? Opinion meanwhile conformed, pleased, and satisfied. And it would finally produce the purest crystal of the Received Idea, recorded by Flaubert: "Talleyrand, Prince: Rage against him."[24] It was an inevitable step—one of many—in negotiations for the alliance between romanticism and kitsch, a first stage in that dulling of sensibility that leads from the fever of 1830 to the desolation of 1850.

Compared with Talleyrand, Chateaubriand is the other blood-line, the other way of making lineage productive (and useful). Talleyrand discreetly guided those many successive men of power who did not know how to walk on parquet; Chateaubriand instead sought to saturate the psyche in a new liquid. Nameless sunsets, misty cataracts, hollow echoes. A burnish of aesthetic retreat, a lining of death, a claustral cobweb, heather invincible among ancient slabs of stone. Talleyrand was his enemy, above all, because he was his chief rival in cultivating and nurturing the past in the new age.

THE SENATOR FROM ST. PETERSBURG: As we watch this evening that sinks away, these dying rays, remnants of a day that will never return, as we wait for the dense night to cheer us and return us to the void, I want to tell you—here, among we Aberrants, how gladdened I am by the thought of being born in this hybrid place, in these shrill times, which I pray each day will receive their punishment. Save, then, to find myself once again on this terrace, built on its four Chinese columns, indulging in my most cherished of pursuits: free conversation. Behind me I feel the peace of my library. I have never written but have often spoken about what majesty I find in the godless doctrines I have always abhorred. There I see malice at work accompanied by formal excellence, in a composition such as to stir respect. The earth has been bridled by a few ideas … but let us not use this inappropriate word … by a few *utterances* entirely devoid of insight into what in truth we undoubtedly are, by a few rules of behavior devoid of any resonance, without us even knowing who has proposed them; nor even if they have ever been put into writing.

> The volatile and promiscuous nature of these phrases makes them akin to what were once proverbs. They are the element we breathe without knowing it. And their emptiness is linked to their immense power: to a capacity to multiply power, to stir and devastate the earth without anyone being able to say how its incessant hum could originate from those scraps of words. And deep down, I am the one who most faithfully relishes these iniquities. Far more than those who practice them as though they were rural nature. And so, when I first met Fouché, we looked upon each other as two rakes from the same club. Perhaps it was then that I told him I wasn't on his side, since Goodness was more adventurous.

Empire: a moment of intermission, of hidden terror. Power is frightened of itself, and fear corrodes each day. The will to hold in zoomorphic stasis (Egypt on furniture) the great *dégringolade* of the bourgeois age. The Empire tries once more to invent an aristocracy (as a realm of will, it has to be able to invent *everything*); the Restoration, with its aristocrats back in their rightful places, cannot for a moment hide the fact that it is installing the Shopkeeper in power. Egypt: to stamp the seal of greatest fixity onto the greatest precariousness. In Napoleonic Egypt the image of terror appears in the face of history for the last time. Then history will sweep everything away toward its nearby estuary. The mingling of fresh and salt water, the Liffey in the Irish Sea, piercing swoon: history abandons its wreckage to post-history. A perpetual farewell, that continues to repeat itself.

Past the Barrière Saint-Martin, accompanied by a single Cossack, Count Nesselrode made his way along "boulevards crowded with people in Sunday dress.[25] They looked as if they were there for some celebration, not for the arrival of an enemy army." In that city where all power had been absent for several hours, he sought out the only place that guaranteed safety, the house where power had always kept a room—there, where Monsieur de Talleyrand waited, behind the terse pilasters of the Hôtel de l'Infantado. The Tsar, the white angel of the north, whose uniforms were too tight-fitting, his courtesy excessive, eager to please everyone, though the Steppes howled behind him, had been tipped off—no one knows by whom, perhaps (it was suggested) by one of Talleyrand's messengers, as usual. The Elysée Palace, where he intended to reside, was mined, was a trap. Yet Talleyrand,

this high dignitary of the defeated state, this official of a political power that was now to be blotted out, presented himself as unassailable.

Nesselrode entered the room just as the Prince's hair was being coiffed, and was enveloped in a cloud of powder. A protective nimbus, the extreme aura, down from the throne and vaporized. But the purpose was to give a patina of ancient tradition to a scandalous gesture: the victor who comes as guest to visit the defeated power like an old friend, so as to feel he is safe. A few days later the staircase hummed with voices at all hours. Talleyrand took the mezzanine, Nesselrode had the second floor, the Tsar the first, along with his aides-de-camp. In the courtyard, Cossacks dozed on bales of straw.

Talleyrand was the first to understand that the new world, as it emerged from the Napoleonic Age in the hope of finding some kind of equilibrium, was no longer expecting, was not demanding a law but the semblance of a law. Any other solution would have been too hard, and would have quickly brought ruin. An inviolable law could no longer be upheld by anyone—or even conceived, except by a true eccentric like Joseph de Maistre on the terrace at St. Petersburg; an absence of law, a total submission to power and to short-lasting agreements between powers was exactly what the world couldn't bring itself to admit, though it practiced it daily. Indeed: it could not admit it for the very reason that it practiced it. The voice of law therefore still seemed necessary, but the law itself would prove to be more or less empty, incapable of withstanding any scrutiny. The law was therefore close to becoming purely ornamental, a flourish of pompous rhetoric, a useful artifice when unveiling monuments, a pretext for a pharmacist's discourse in the coffeehouse. The whole century would abound, like no previous age, in appeals to principles, while keeping secretly in mind one single principle about principles, that of Napoleon: "*Principes* est bien, cela n'engage point—Principles are fine, they don't commit you to anything."[26] From the moment Talleyrand throws the card of legitimacy onto the table, accompanying his gesture with a few impelling words, the grand proliferation of the *bêtise* begins. It will find its dazzled chroniclers in Baudelaire, then in Flaubert, then in Bloy, then in Karl Kraus, and will fix its centenary celebrations for August 1914, replacing the fireworks at Versailles with the rockets and mortar blasts on the Belgian Front. There was no further talk, by then, of legitimacy—but there is always

some abstraction, each feebler than the last, that takes the vacant place of the law. Now it was the turn of "neutrality." The sacred, in its migrations, no longer infused the arms of a dynasty, but the paper of a treaty. The only thing left at this point was for the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, to remark: "All this for a word—'neutrality'—for a scrap of paper." The equivalence was now established between "a scrap of paper" and a new, vaster, all-pervading kind of slaughter, open to everyone, which would have allowed the ancient divinity of war to laugh once and for all at the worthless law that had sought to subjugate it.

"The legend about the origins of the Wahungwe people refers to a king called 'Madsivoa.'[27] His name is said to derive from *dsivoa* (lake, ford, pool)." Any Western theory about legitimacy is lacking in one respect: it knows nothing about the waters of origin. "Who made you king?" Aldebert, count of Périgord and ancestor of Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, asks Hugh Capet, king of the Île-de-France and first king of France. But Capet is unable to say "I come from Dsivoa, from the pool of origins, I came out of one of those water bubbles that form spontaneously on its surface." Without those waters, all are usurpers. And the first usurpers can then appeal to one single ally—time. When a sovereign power exists for a certain time it is supposed that the ruthlessness with which it has exerted its authority is already encased and covered by the *douceur* of custom, by prolonged acceptance, and finally: by tradition. And so tradition will no longer serve to establish the origins, but to conceal them. The great Aufklärer, the terrible Enlighteners, up to Nietzsche, to Freud, have always been fanatical searchers for origins and genealogies—that was the peculiar *nefas* of the West that attracted and dazzled them. By filling the missing gap of origin, they thought it would be possible at last to move down without delusion to the present. They then discovered origin as a delusion, choosing in this way the delusion into which they wanted to fall—and it would hound them to the last.

Legitimacy brings together two fundamental operations that take place in the mind: analogy and convention, branches that grow out of one single trunk: substitution. By analogy, the only legitimacy is that of sacred investiture, which descends by resonances and attractions through all levels of being. Where that resonance dies out, there can be no legitimacy. By

convention, legitimacy is the prime example of that arbitrary pact that allows all kinds of mechanisms to operate, from language to society. As always, convention is not concerned in this case either with essences or with substances, but with functionality—and, being the very soul of substitution, it is ready to swap one form for the other.

In 1956, John Von Neumann used the Silliman Lectures to give a short outline of what had happened recently, what was now happening between machines that calculated by themselves. When he began setting out the distinction between digital computers and analog computers, he gave a new name to the two poles that secretly sustain us. The digital pole would seem biologically secondary and dependent, in the same way that exchange would seem secondary to the object being exchanged. But then the digital pole takes command, revealing a capacity to envelop the other pole, to absorb it—and naturally to utilize it. The digital pole confers great power, but it does not contain, within the machine, that physicality of changing values that is a last palpable record of the outside world. Digitality is pure sequence of signs: when its control is extended to everything, we no longer know what earth supports us—if there still is an earth. We continue experiencing the analog pole, we no longer know what to call it: it is mute emotion that overwhelms and no longer flows into its ancient estuary. Digitality has made it a new bed, indestructible silicon. Above, a silent current flows, waiting for the Bateau Ivre.

"Monsieur de Talleyrand, scion of one of the oldest families in France (royal counts, indeed), was the eldest of three children; but he had been lame since childhood, his family considered him unfit to appear in society and had therefore destined him for the Church, even though he was a man who lacked those qualities that might have made him acceptable to the Roman communion.[28] Many times I have heard him say that, despised by his parents as a wretch who would never be good for anything, he had adopted a reserved and gloomy manner from childhood: he had never slept under the same roof as his father and mother; they had forced him to renounce his right of primogeniture in favor of his younger brother." Étienne Dumont, Mirabeau's biographer, gives a short, blunt description of Talleyrand, immediately exposing a wound. Talleyrand's infirmity was caused by an accident, one of the chance events of history and fate: at the

age of four, entrusted to the care of a country woman, he dislocates a leg falling from a cabinet. For that accident, for that chance occurrence, his lineage spurns him, disowning him. Talleyrand is legitimacy denied. Talleyrand is destined *to become* a foundling. From then on he will know a double lineage, from the lowest and from the highest rung on the ladder of life. He will be of the oldest stock, condemned by fate; but he will also be the wild plant that grows in solitude. Someone from a most illustrious estate and someone who has never shared the same roof as his father. The age-old root and the uprooted. He who has the power to give protection and he who is constantly compelled to seek it.

The nobility of the Talleyrand-Périgord family is not a nobility of spirit—or drawn by spirit. It is a biological nobility that does not deign to explain or justify itself. The family motto *Re que Diou* means they will answer only to God—with answers, if there are any, that are invisible and unascertainable. Besides, nobility is "a name and a coat of arms."[29] It is a heredity, so that the individual is just the temporary vehicle. And the individual, as such, deserves no particular attention, except when the "family" is considered as embodying him ("For in the great houses it was the family that people loved, much more than the individuals, and especially the young individuals who are as yet unknown").[30] This is the ultimate form of sacrifice, now empty, reduced to its husk, as perpetuated in the aristocracy, that cannot renounce sacrifice unless it renounces itself. Talleyrand will thus suffer atrociously for the cruelty, indifference, and capriciousness that affect him as an individual, and bind him in his young role as sacrificial victim (the lame firstborn who is to be rejected and abandoned to the Church because he cannot achieve the only single glory, which is military glory), but he will never speak a word against the mechanism of sacrifice. Indeed, after all, his politics are based on a respect for sacrificial heredity: the only truth, however intolerable. But nothing is more intolerable than the sacrifice that continues to operate in the age that rejects it, the age in which Talleyrand happens to be living. The evasive fluidity of his politics goes to mitigate that horror, to cover it for a little longer with the veil of its noble and bloody past.

The Primal Scene, from which Talleyrand's view of politics derives, is played out where his grandmother Mortemart lives, "in a vast room of the

chateau, which they called 'the pharmacy.' "[31] There, seated beside his grandmother's velvet armchair (where he was placed—he emphasized—at the age of five "as of right," in exactly the same way as he would later sit beside Napoleon, Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis Philippe), the young Talleyrand observed the primordial mystery of power: the power of healing, which the thaumaturgic kings used to display on those afflicted with scrofula (Louis XVI would still do it at Reims, and the young chaplain Talleyrand would see him repeat it on 2,400 sufferers who came from the farthest provinces: "May God heal you; the King touches you").[32] Grandmother Mortemart applied it to the sick of the village. Young Talleyrand took part in the ceremony with devotion. On those occasions his grandmother "had a silk dress trimmed with lace.[33] She wore a cascade of ribbons, with bows on the sleeves matching the color of the seasons. Her large cuffs had three layers. Her Sunday dress, which was more elaborate than that of the other days of the week, had a fur collar, a cap with a bow, and a black bonnet that tied beneath the chin." Around her, a small court of Périgord nobles kept order according to rank, flanking her as she sat in a velvet armchair, before an old black lacquer table, distributing ointments, syrups, and other medicaments to the peasants with a ceremonial gesture.

His grandmother indicated the ointment to be applied, and "one of the gentlemen who had accompanied her to mass went to fetch it.[34] Another produced a small chest containing linen." Young Talleyrand then took out a piece of cloth and held it out while his grandmother cut it. This was the duty of the minister, from the days of Shang China: to make sure the cloth to be applied as a bandage is cut carefully. In the majesty of this scene, Talleyrand has described (without stating it) his highest conception of politics—a conception that would operate behind designs that no one can yet claim to have reconstructed. And in that very scene he sensed a reality, as yet unexplained, that would always guide him: the "heredity of feelings," the essentially nourishing, as well as destructive, relationship between time and quality of whatever kind.[35] Time alone ensures that every reality secretes its *douceur*. Otherwise, everything is naturally bitter, insipid, arid. The old Périgord nobles who paid court to Madame de Mortemart and were ready to leave no trace of their existence prepared with their silent step the arrival of something unprecedented, indicating to the young Talleyrand how he might bear it: "The ways of the Périgord nobility resembled their old castles: there was something grand and solid about them; the light filtered

in faintly but gently.[36] They were moving slowly but surely toward a more enlightened civilization."

Beneath Talleyrand's every gesture is a hint of the sacramental origin of power, though he never says this, nor perhaps does he think much about it. The paradox of his art is in making origin still active in an age—in the first age—in which the transmission of noble titles had ended for good. Sacrality therefore had to become a fiction, and the challenge would be to make it into a powerful fiction: to invent, with Napoleon, a dynasty; to claim, with the Congress of Vienna, that it is still possible to appeal to a "principle"—and to appeal to that very "legitimacy" that had just been buried; to persuade society even to accept an insurrection, with Louis Philippe. Talleyrand believed less than anyone else in the fictions he was suggesting. "Legitimacy" now becomes something similar to what the "self" would be in the age of Ernst Mach—insubstantial, but a useful point of reference. He knew that the aim each time was to hold out for a few years. After a few years, simulation approaches its death, which is its collision with the bedrock of simulated reality. But the transmission of power (and also the transmission of thought) would now be—had to be—a chain of these slippery and precarious fictions, which nevertheless succeed once again, for a brief period, in capturing the essence of power—or at least getting close to it for a few moments. On the hidden difference between New and Old power, on the secret weakness of the New, along with its showy trappings of power, Talleyrand left us the parable of his grandmother Mortemart's pharmacy, together with an abrupt but telling comment: "Pharmacies better stocked and more scientific, perhaps also operated free of charge by doctors of great reputation, would never have brought so many poor people together and, above all, would not have done them so much good.[37] Those pharmacies would have lacked certain great resources for healing people: good disposition, respect, faith and gratitude." With the greatest precision and least ostentation, Talleyrand sought here, and only here, to describe the charisma of power.

The Marquis de Lafayette is the Hero of Democracies. Always on horseback, his empty gaze sizes up the crowd, eagerly seeks the "delicious sensation of the smile of the multitude."[38] He knows it is important to think little, but with determination. And above all, that it is important to seize the

opportunity for certain gestures that might become vignettes: an embrace at a window while the crowd cheers outside, a white charger, a plume in the breeze. With his usual perfidy, but this time stifled by dutiful praise, Sainte-Beuve observed that Lafayette had transformed "the idol of honor into another idol: that of popularity"; a further sarcasm: "Lafayette's prime motive is *opinion* in the honorable sense, glory in the ancient sense,"[39] a reference to how *doxa* had been transformed from its ancient splendor of appearance to the mental dross of contemporary times.[40]

The new rituals, which made Talleyrand laugh, with their jarring awkwardness, as any new and secular ritual was bound to be, are seen by Lafayette as freshest water that continuously streaks his uniform, in the absence still—though for just a few years—of the photographic plate. This hero will be the model for much vulgarity, but he cannot be described as vulgar—if anything, ridiculous. He is still protected by a faint aura of the ancien régime, the memory of many beautiful women seduced, including the difficult Madame de Simiane. His patriotic old age will be a revered and somewhat faded brocade. He, too, proclaims the capital letters that will reverberate around the halls of parliaments, then over town squares, before reemerging, somewhat surprised and reluctantly, in the steely storms of August 1914. They, too, "hadn't wanted it."

With Lafayette the pact of alliance between Good Causes and Stupidity is sealed. From then on, those seeking out the good of Man will have a grossly inaccurate, good-natured, obtuse, pompous image of man. Lafayette lets himself be escorted by the Unknown Soldier. For Good to return to being a fascinating conquest, it is necessary to await Simone Weil. And this will only be because Weil paid careful attention to platonic Good.

Lafayette is the true opposite of Talleyrand. They are born and die within a few years of each other, both have illustrious ancestries, both are involved in everything. Lafayette, convinced from the very start that he is moving with the times, is especially eager every now and then to strike historic poses, and in the meantime to survive. He has an unshakable capacity not to notice. Talleyrand also moves with the times, follows the trends, changes his shirts and his allegiances. But this is not why he is not forgiven. On the contrary: it is felt that his amorality is consistent and faithful, that his ever-

moving and restless waters conceal some solid, ancient rock that resists the ravages of time much better than the papier-mâché of Lafayette.

After the many insults hurled against Talleyrand in Lafayette's name, Talleyrand's revenge on Lafayette comes from a judge who is equal to his task: Vautrin. In *Le Père Goriot*, during the course of Rastignac's initiation, the convict offers him these words: "I have a friend whom I have attached closely to myself, a colonel in the Army of the Loire who has just been transferred into the Garde Royale.[41] He has taken my advice and turned ultra-royalist: he is not one of those fools who never change their opinions. Of all pieces of advice, my cherub, I would give you this—don't stick to your opinions any more than your words. If anyone asks you for them, let him have them—at a price. A man who prides himself on never changing opinions is a man who ends up always going in a straight line, an idiot who believes in infallibility. There are no such things as principles, there are only events; there are no laws, there are only circumstances: the man of talent accepts events and circumstances and turns them to his own ends. If principles and laws were fixed, nations would not change them as readily as we change our shirts. The individual is not obliged to be more particular than a whole nation. The man who has served France less than anyone is venerated as a fetish because he has always seen red; at most he should be placed in the Conservatoire, among the automatons, with the label 'Lafayette,' while the prince against whom everyone casts his stone, and who despises humanity enough to spit in its face all the oaths it demands, prevented the division of France at the Congress of Vienna: they owe him laurels, and they throw mud at him. Oh! I know something of affairs, I can tell you! I hold the secrets of many men! But enough."

(It is difficult to rage against Lafayette. Behind it all, he is likably vacuous, someone who has decided to become the Plutarchan hero in the same way that others become bankers. And he has also chosen it because it is an occasional occupation that allows him plenty of spare time. When he enters the salon of the idéologue Antoine Destutt de Tracy, the lady of the house greets *Mon cher Monsieur* "with an enchanting tone of voice" and everyone admires his tall figure, on which is "a face that is imperturbable, cool, colorless as an old family portrait, a head covered by a short, badly made wig."[42] But Stendhal has no doubt: "I felt, without anyone needing to tell me, that Monsieur de Lafayette was simply a hero from Plutarch.[43] He

lived from day to day, with no excessive spirit, simply carrying out like Epaminondas the great action that came his way. Meanwhile, his sole occupation, despite his age, was to take hold of the skirts of pretty girls (*vulgo* fondle their asses), and he did so quite frequently, with no qualms." He was a simpleton, but in the vague generalities of his conversation there was a "basic elegance."[44] And a basic indifference for the lofty ideas he fervently professed, rather like a libertine ready to make any fatuous declaration that might further his purpose of seduction. "Monsieur de Lafayette is extremely courteous and indeed affectionate to everyone, but *courteous as a king*."[45] He had an "admirable" way of knowing that "the essential thing is not to displease anyone and to remember everybody's name."[46] While they speak to him about the political developments of the day—and there he has no doubts: encourage "all schemers,[47] all fools, all those full of their own pomposity"—his eye is following one single new, young Portuguese girl, glimpsed among "Monsieur de Lafayette's fifteen or twenty young nieces, almost all blond with splendid complexions and ordinary faces," who are "lined up in battle order on the blue sofa."[48])

"Lucien had to endure from good Gauthier what the young men of Paris call a *tartine*, a diatribe on America, democracy, the prefects that have to be chosen from among the members of the general councils, etc.

"While he was listening to these arguments that can be found in print everywhere, Lucien thought: 'What a difference of spirit between Du Poirier and Gauthier! And yet Gauthier is probably as honest as the other is a scoundrel. In spite of my profound respect for him, I can hardly keep awake. How can I call myself a republican after all this? This proves that I am not cut out to live under a republic; for me it would be the tyranny of all mediocrities; and I can barely tolerate even those who are more worthy of respect. For me, what we need is a crooked and amusing prime minister, such as Walpole or Monsieur de Talleyrand.'

"Meanwhile, Gauthier was ending his discourse with these words … *But Americans in France … there aren't any*.

" 'Take a small shopkeeper in Rouen and Lyon, stingy and lacking in imagination, and you have an American!'

" 'Oh, how you grieve me,' exclaimed Gauthier, getting up sadly to leave, as the clock struck one."[49]

Note for Lucien

Mon cher,

Nearly a hundred and fifty years have passed since your meeting with that good man Gauthier, nearly two hundred since the storming of the Bastille, and I wish to give you some news. Followed by his comrades, now no longer in out-of-the-way provinces, but audacious and assertive in all worlds, which are moreover also on the way to liberation, Gauthier has never for one moment stopped talking. Indeed, he is anxious to talk to everyone he meets. Meanwhile, the Ligue des Compagnons has shown itself unanimously reluctant to be *déniaisée*. And if, from time to time, one of the female allegorical figures allows herself to be *débauchée*, she soon returns demurely to her duty. We wish they were all Ninotchkas, but even that physical type is not now one of the most frequent. Those massacres for the common good have been of no use. Not even those between brothers. The tide of good intentions continues to wash about among waves of tedium. The cause of justice and of the people still fixes its gaze on holy pictures, but never achieves their aesthetic tenderness. The adventurousness of the Good is still far from being found, after so many years in which we have been compelled to feed with the Iniquitous, with their extravagant lies and intrigues. Around us there is a stubborn insistence on changing the way we live, but with no clear notions about the facts of life. While you were writing *Souvenirs d'égotisme* with your automatic writing at Civitavecchia, you were hoping those pages would have been published ten years after your death. Twenty years after was already too late, you feared: once all the "nuances de la vie" had changed, the reader would have perceived only the masses.[50] Then you wondered: "But where are the *masses* in these games my pen is playing?" Well, think Gauthier: that *nuance* of yours has become a mass—or a "multitude," as one school mistress once said when she wanted to avoid overcompromising herself with the words of the day. I send you my fondest wishes and look forward to seeing you this evening for whist.

It took forever, as usual, for the Prince of Wales to be dressed. To pass the time that morning, Laclos, aloof by nature, whose words had something dark and cold about them, fell into the trap that Tilly, an able man of the world, had prepared for him. "Monsieur de Laclos, who had no great tact at Court, but had all the gloomy impatience of a philosopher or a conspirator, preferred idle chatter instead of continually pulling out his watch and kicking his heels."[51]

"How did *Les Liaisons dangereuses* come about?" ventured Tilly as soon as he saw him yield. And finally Laclos told him: a provincial daydream, the result of the long, tedious period spent on garrison duty at Grenoble. There was a fellow soldier, now a famous scientist, who had many stories about women: he was a born womanizer. Among these, a woman from Grenoble who vaguely resembles the character of the Marquise de Merteuil. They used to talk, and Laclos sometimes gave him advice on what moves he should make. He had also collected many other stories over the years, his poison chest: all he had to do was transpose them into the right setting, Paris. That's how it happened, more or less. Laclos broke off—and came to an abrupt end: "I improved the style as best as I could, and after a final few months' work I let my book loose on the public.[52] Since then I've heard almost nothing about how it's doing, though they tell me it's still alive."

At that time, in the same way that Valmont had "worked" Cécile Volanges, Laclos was still "working" the Duc d'Orléans, in whom many people saw a terrifying Valmont of politics. From London, the Duke sent letters on strategy that he diligently copied from the drafts of his counselor Laclos. What crystalline intoxication it is to be the man who moves the man who is thought to move the conspiracy of the Revolution! From the military solitude of the Île de Ré, where *Les Liaisons* had been created, he had reached the delirium of the spider who thinks it can cover the world with its web! A few months later, Laclos claimed he was secretly moving not only the Duc d'Orléans but also the Jacobin Club. And it was partly true. Then the spider's web was swept away by the torrent of events. In a box at La Scala, the artillery general Laclos looked about him, disconsolate: nothing for him was "more tedious than an Italian *opera buffa*, except perhaps an

opera seria."[53] There, in the box of the military general staff, he was introduced to a red-cheeked dragoon, still a boy, timid and curious. Laclos's gaze finally "softened" when he learned that this Second Lieutenant Henri Beyle was also from Grenoble.[54] From one province to another, he reflected, thinking of Milan, a city for him devoid of any charm, made of roads and houses. And perhaps it was the moment to go back to writing. One plan he kept close to his heart, for his old age: to write a work dedicated to "popularizing this idea: *that the sole happiness lies in the family*." It would have been no small thing: "It will be difficult to arrange events in the right way, and the almost insurmountable difficulty will be that of stirring interest without resorting to anything novelistic."[55]

The jumble of styles and images of 1790 would soon be reduced to a unity fearful of contamination. Every hybrid is vice. In the streets, the frivolous variety of dresses disappeared, "the uniform coat of the new world was worn," a first sign of the civilian who doesn't wish to be noticed.[56] And on the stage, as well, there was the unity of the most tedious Golden Age ever imagined by humanity. Chateaubriand, who during his recent American wanderings had experienced the rustle of virgin forests, Creole eroticism, and the "sublime disarray" of Niagara Falls, also heard the piping of the liberators: "While tragedy turned the streets red, pastoral poetry flourished in the theaters; every plot involved innocent shepherds and virginal shepherdesses: fields, streams, meadows, rams, doves, a golden age beneath the straw roof, brought back to life to the sighing of the flageolet before the cooing thyrses and the credulous *tricoteuses* leaving the spectacle of the guillotine.[57] If Sanson had had enough time, he would have played the role of Colin, and Théroigne de Méricourt would have played that of Babet. The members of the Convention prided themselves on being the kindest of men: good fathers, good sons, good husbands, they went out walking with their children; nursed them; wept a tender tear as they watched their simple games; took those little lambs gently in their arms to show them the pretty horse that carted the victims to their execution. They spoke of nature, peace, piety, good works, innocence, domestic virtues; these espousers of philanthropy had their neighbors' heads cut off with extreme sensitivity, to make the happiness of the human race ever greater."

Paris air. Hegel wandered around Paris in amazement, and at the Palais-Royal, that "Paris within Paris," he dutifully followed the instructions in the *Manuel des étrangers*, though Victor Cousin laughed at him. To Marie Helena, who awaited him in Berlin, he was careful to mention the most notable things: "Today, for example, we went to an *abattoir*, a slaughterhouse.[58] In what city of the world would I have gone to a slaughterhouse? But this is one of the remarkable things for which Paris is indebted to Napoleon, like a hundred other great things … And earlier we visited the Stock Exchange, this also founded by Napoleon; what a temple!"

Let us try to remove Talleyrand from the picture of his age, let us wipe away all evidence of his footprints. What is now missing? Fluidity. What is left is the crudeness of revolutionaries and legitimists, of the Directory, of the Napoleonic period, and of the bourgeoisie. They beat, like rams, against the same wall. While every municipal partisan spirit was at last finding his metaphysics in the vision of the Party, Talleyrand maintained the indifference of the sky and the water: mutable, elusive, unscathed among many faiths.

Talleyrand was no lover of *bons mots*. The only behavior, he felt, that reached perfection to some extent was that of a person he barely knew: his mother. And Talleyrand's mother rejected *bons mots* as the bane of conversation. "Going to visit my mother, I chose the times when she was alone: in that way I could better appreciate her fineness of spirit.[59] It seemed to me that no one ever had more charm in conversation than she. She had no pretension. She spoke just in undertones; she never used a *bon mot*: it was something too explicit. *Bons mots* get remembered, and she just wanted her words to bring pleasure and be lost."

"His manner, constantly light when dealing with the greatest matters …" Talleyrand's *lightness*, and especially when dealing with "the greatest matters," is the characteristic that reveals the hidden role he has chosen for himself.[60] There is no longer anything in the world that cannot be treated with lightness—this is his premise. Everyone is afraid to acknowledge it. Talleyrand accepts it and puts it into practice in his every action.

This is enough to create that immeasurable distance that many regard as monstrous between him and everyone else. Talleyrand is capable of using

lightness because things no longer have a preestablished weight. They fluctuate, they are huge, poisonous bodies that do not rest in themselves. Nothing stands firm. There is nothing more incorporeal and empty than will. Nor can an immediately apparent bond be found between that silent emptiness, pure compressed energy, and the inordinate transformations that it provokes, often without allowing any lull before the devastation.

Living in the Torrent

Talleyrand soon realized that disputes over power would no longer be fought out on a chessboard, where each move was made with slow ceremony, but in a current far stronger than all that it dragged along with it. This is the "torrent" he spoke of when describing the years of the Revolution—the same that we find in the pages of many of his contemporaries. Saint-Simon, when writing about the Regent, once said that "he could live only in the action and in the torrent of affairs": but that choice,[61] tantamount to a drug for the man who had been "bored since birth," now dragged all and everything toward Amazonian cataracts.[62] Torrentiality was not a prodigious accident that came to rock history before being reabsorbed by it: on the contrary, it was the expression of a new dominant character—the fever for experiment—that was grafted onto history, transforming it forever. Talleyrand would find it everywhere: under Napoleon but also under the Restoration, and finally under the bourgeoisie of Louis Philippe. And he would live just long enough to taste the first fruits of the petite bourgeoisie protecting the rise of Adolphe Thiers, an eager journalist who had come to Paris from the provinces. Seen with an unsympathetic eye, like that of Talleyrand, the Reaction and the White Terror followed hotfoot after the Jacobins: "I also wish to recall a decree of Count Wurmser, the Intendant General of the Austrian Army, to show just how great was the urge of the revolutionary spirit (I cannot describe it otherwise) of governments who declared they were waging war solely against the Revolution, in the person of Bonaparte."[63] As Talleyrand would

state in his note to the allies, dated July 31, 1815, the transition from the Revolution to Napoleon had been a transition from "l'esprit d'égalité" to "l'esprit de conquête." And it could be said that it was through the very bigotry of the Restoration that "l'esprit de conquête" had achieved its goal of infiltrating the whole of Europe.

One of the many illusions that Talleyrand does not harbor is that of order: he never sees order around him, even if he strives to create it. For Talleyrand, from 1789 until his death, the revolution never stops: and he predicts it will be a long time before it comes to an end. On the eve of July 1830, he wrote to Baron de Barante: "We are moving toward an unknown world with no pilot and no compass; only one thing is sure—that all this will end in shipwreck.[64] The English Revolution lasted half a century. Ours is only forty years old; so I cannot hope in any way to see its end. I even doubt whether the present generation will witness it and, save for circumstances that are not to be counted upon, those who see it shall have no cause to rejoice. We are entering upon new adventures …" For Talleyrand, an age becomes revolutionary when words and deeds, freed from all dependency and hurled like missiles, constantly distort life, shape it with rough fingertips, force it into reaction. The thrill of being part of an advancing movement—like a wave, not of the sea, but of personal will—was long seen as a fond illusion, yet in the end it nauseated clear-thinking minds (Baudelaire and Flaubert after 1848). Seen from a distance over two centuries from that magnificent beginning, it is an illusion that merits only disdain—and it still stirs the good conscience of the Western intelligentsia (though it's a West that binds the world like sticky tape). There is a continual yearning to "go to the people," which eventually ends with confinement in a torture chamber.[65]

For Alexis de Tocqueville, too, the French Revolution is the start of a "*permanent* state," a new connection between doctrine and violence, which seemed likely to last. Meantime a new species of mankind was perpetually at work, offering the world a disruptive unity, in the same way that monks in their cloisters had once nurtured its invisible bonds between one invasion and another. It is "a turbulent and destructive race, always ready to demolish and ill-equipped to build; a race that not only practices violence, ignores individual rights and oppresses minorities but—and this is new—claims that this is how it must be; it declares it as doctrine: that there are no

individual rights and, so to speak, the individual himself does not exist: there is only a mass, for the achievement of whose ends everything is always permissible."[66] And, even if Tocqueville never sought to recount history but to speculate about it, his description strays in the direction of a Russian novel: "For the past sixty years there has always been a great school of revolution open to the public in whatever part of the world where all restless, violent spirits, men deep in debt … would go for training and instruction."[67] For example, Berlin University, where a penniless nobleman, Mikhail Bakunin, arrived with money borrowed from his friend Alexander Herzen, to taste the "voluptuousness of destruction."

The deadly "torrent" described by Talleyrand becomes a "blizzard" in Metternich's "confession of faith" in his letter to Alexander I from the Silesian capital, Troppau, dated December 15, 1820, a key text for every Reactionary. The last two sentences read as follows: "Every great State that is determined to survive the blizzard of the moment still conserves great prospects of salvation.[68] A strong union between States on the principles set out here will defeat the same blizzard." Sonorous whirlpools were now replaced by a blinding tempest. Reality threatened to freeze its most ardent observer. A few days later, while traveling to the Congress of Laibach, Metternich saw as a strange blessing the "first gust from the South," which "in less than a quarter of an hour [melted] the ice that covered the windows of the carriage and had been half an inch thick at certain points." For a moment he went back in time: no longer as a prince, but as a servant, and yet happy: "I breathed in a new life, like servants who often inhale aromas when they open the doors of a drawing room."[69] That moment of suspended intoxication was short-lived. The ice loomed once again: "Tomorrow we shall see the avalanche arrive, the sad avalanche of statesmen."

Chateaubriand is constantly playing, with cunning, malice, sleight of hand, with the exoteric and esoteric versions of his writing. This creates a meditative and visionary Chateaubriand that is, at one and the same time, his most ludicrous and his most sublime aspect, his most popular and his most covert aspect. We then have, on the one side, the Chateaubriand who has been the bane of so many French *lycée* students: the man who always

finds a proper context, carefully arranges the objects onstage, adjusts the lighting, and then "launches" into one of his meditations, with the same ease with which an office clerk, during the coffee break, starts telling his colleagues about his car's engine performance. Thus he succeeds in keeping a proper distance from the battlefield of Waterloo in order to meditate calmly on the historical occasion, while cannons rumble in the background. And thus it is most rare, as he himself admits, for him to pass through "the silent and uninhabited halls of the Tuileries without offering some serious reflection."[70] But the two levels of prose sometimes become juxtaposed: all of a sudden, during a piece of somber, lofty, and vague blather, a few sharp, disturbing lines appear, which then abruptly end—and immediately we hear the polite murmur resume. In one of his many meditations on graveyards, which are often interchangeable, like the discourses on moonlight that he used to repeat to guests at the home of Madame de Villeparisis's father, we find these phrases: "Is it certain everything is emptiness and absence in the realm of tombs?[71] Will there not be existences of nothingness, thoughts of dust? Could those bones not perhaps have ways of life that we ignore? Who is acquainted with the passions, the pleasures, the embraces of these dead?"

In the "high politics" of literature, around 1830, an axis is formed among Chateaubriand, George Sand, and Victor Hugo that gives preeminence to good feelings—whether they are noble and remote, as in Chateaubriand, or are ladled out from the thick soup of the *peuple*, as in George Sand, or glide on visionary clouds, as in Victor Hugo. Ideals and Lofty Aspirations now become solemn platoons of armed guards around the enclosure of Art. From a distance, the only thing to be seen is their maneuvers, and every so often there's a burst of gunfire as a reminder that guardsmen die but they never surrender, that the realms of the heart are always the deepest, that an indomitable soul will never bow to a hostile world. Meanwhile, inside the enclosure, somewhat hidden from the public gaze, among curtains and scraps of cloth, crates and trunks, the cruel old lace of Art is continually unraveled, with no concern about Ideals or Listeners.

Sainte-Beuve thought, with sly regret, that Chateaubriand, like certain wines, could not travel outside the language and borders of France. This because he would have lost his "magic, which is all in syllables." And he wouldn't have allowed himself to be seen without his "frame, which is

France—the brilliant, vain, mad, sweet France."[72] Extraneous to every concept, indulgent to imagery, Chateaubriand is most perceptive at hearing the currents of sounds within each individual word, a master in breathing imperfects, inventor of the glaucous syllable. His is a certain orchestral color that we find in every particle of his prose, in the same way that Wagner's orchestral color pervades every bar of the *Ring*. The fate of such works lies in their timbre no less than in the story they tell.

Exempla Voluptatis

Mademoiselle de la Force, before devoting herself to fairy tales (as Madame d'Aulnoy had done before her), used to dance at Ménilmontant with Monsieur de Briou, who knew whole pages of *L'Astrée* by heart, and was handsome and a minor aristocrat with a large fortune. Monsieur de Briou's father was opposed to their affair and locked his son in a room overlooking the palace courtyard. So Mademoiselle de la Force hired a strolling player to take his dancing bears into Monsieur de Briou's courtyard. Mademoiselle de la Force danced naked and drenched in sweat, sewn up inside the skin of a bear, beneath her lover's window, and even managed to get close enough to arrange another encounter with him as she beat time with her paws. After the performance, the strolling player handed a basketful of figs to his bears and led them back toward the Pont-Neuf.

"A neighbor in the Combourg district had come to spend a few days at the chateau, along with his very attractive wife.[73] Something happened in the village, I don't remember what; we rushed to one of the drawing room windows to see. I reached there first, the visitor was running behind me, I wanted to offer her my place and turned toward her; she unintentionally cut across my path, and I felt myself squeezed between her and the window. I lost all sense of what was happening around me."

"A black girl of thirteen or fourteen, almost naked and of singular beauty, opened the barrier to the enclosure like a young Night.[74] We bought corn cakes, chickens, eggs, milk, and returned to the house with our pitchers and our baskets. I gave the young African my silk handkerchief: I had been welcomed to the land of freedom by a slave girl."

"On those same pavements where ragged folk and men in frock coats are now seen strolling, young girls used to pass wearing white capes, straw hats tied under their chins with ribbons, baskets on their arms, with fruit or a book; all of them used to keep their eyes lowered, all of them would blush when someone looked at them.[75] 'England,' says Shakespeare, 'is a nest of swans among the waters.' "

UNE FEMME CURIEUSE: Voluptuousness is a state of the imagination that precedes, accompanies, and follows pleasure. It can be compared with that appearance assumed by trees in a park, the steps of a stairway, the outline of a manor house, when lit by the moon. A luminous glow then reveals the glory of their nature; and they are wrapped in a wonderfully sweet halo.

Madame Tallien, Juliette Récamier, and Joséphine de Beauharnais appear at the Bal des Victimes in Abel Gance's film *Napoléon*, looking like three *déesses* of the Folies Bergère and faithful to the *légende* even in their Voluptuousness. Here, they are not parading on a brightly lit catwalk: all they have to do is descend a few gray steps on which they radiate "a sweet luminescence" (as one newspaper put it), while in the background, through the prison bars, the distant light of the outside world casts a halo around their shoulders and their hair. The film has a mauve tint: the camera lingers on the open tunics of these flappers of the Directory. Bonaparte, a sullen voyeur, draws back into a corner. The camera starts moving again as the dancing begins: among the bodies, which mingle, ever more softly, we no longer distinguish the curve behind a knee from that of a neck or arms. In this celluloid carnality, Glory bursts out of its revolutionary sackcloth.

The Grand Ball

With the Congress of Vienna a new kind of spectacle appeared in politics. No one in that prolonged social gathering could believe that the purpose of the negotiations was what everybody claimed—the restoration of monarchist sovereignty. Instead, there was an urgent need to test out for the first time in lavish orchestration the *language of concealment*, which would make such a contribution to the political process over the next decades. "The grand remarks about 'reconstructing social order,' about 'regenerating political order in Europe,' about 'a lasting peace based on a division of power,' etc., etc.,[76] were made to reassure the people, and to give an air of dignity and importance to that solemn meeting, but the real purpose of the Congress *was to share out among the winners the spoils taken from the losers*." This is what Friedrich von Gentz noted in his memorandum of February 12 for Prince John Caradja, hospodar of Wallachia. But the division of spoils among the victors is what happens in any war: if a perceptive observer like Gentz felt the need to point it out, it was precisely because he had a bleak awareness that the real significance of the Congress lay in its paraphernalia, much more than in its ultimate decisions. A new aesthetic of politics was unfolding there. And Gentz felt it to such an extent that he wanted to record, at the very outset, how, beneath the masquerade of grand phrases and grand balls, the old unshakeable purpose of politics —"the dividing out of spoils"—persisted.

Metternich noted in the margin of Gentz's memorandum that those words reflected the "peculiar frivolousness" of the author, in whom he recognized "the rarest intellectual gifts and a true wealth of positive understanding." According to Metternich, Gentz made the mistake of placing too much faith in his impressions, which were often the result of society chat. But what was the Congress, other than a constant stream of society chat, where the spies and the ladies played a role no less important than the ministers and heads of state? Metternich knew this better than most, which is confirmed by his final comment on the memorandum: "*All in all*, this account is correct."[77]

At the Congress of Vienna—and for the first time at a meeting of Western powers—there is concern about popular approval. Fear has brought the need for this entirely new caution, which requires innovations in language and conduct. Talleyrand is, as usual, the quickest to recognize it and would calmly state that at the Congress he defended "the cause of the people."[78] How could such a change take place?

A quirk of history has turned the clock back. These rulers of ancient dynasties arrive at Vienna like as many parvenus of power, primordial usurpers. The Napoleonic disease has infected them all. His most perverse achievement has been to wipe out the expanse of time over which monarchs had given *douceur* to their power. Now they all appear like popular insurgents who need, however, to give an artificial patina of history to the crude reality of their command. This is how they are caught in the snare of legitimacy that Talleyrand has set. This is why they come out with "grand phrases" designed to reassure their people.

In their shortsightedness, they imagine these phrases will be enough to tide them over for a long while. They don't take into account that these are drugged words: those who use them once will have to use them again and again, more and more frequently, until they become bound up in those words, until they require those same words to be used by their subjects, since such words in the meantime have become an essential instrument of power.

And yet someone, a few months before the opening of the Congress of Vienna, had described that new trajectory of the word, providing even a glimpse of the Stalinist trials to come. Benjamin Constant's *De l'Esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation* had been printed on January 30, 1814:

"Despotism banishes all forms of liberty; usurpation needs those forms in order to justify overthrowing what it has replaced; but in seizing them, it profanes them.

… … …

"The despot forbids debate, and demands only obedience; the usurper prescribes a ludicrous test, as a preliminary to acceptance.

… … …

"There is no limit to the tyranny that seeks to secure a semblance of approval.

… … …

"It is usurpation that has invented those so-called acts of public sanction, those high-flown addresses, those monotonous compliments, a customary tribute that the same men generously proclaim, in more or less the same words, about the most conflicting decisions: in words where fear apes all the appearances of courage in order to celebrate its own shame and give thanks for its own misfortunes. A singular device that deceives no one! A game that impresses no one and should have yielded long ago to the arrows of ridicule! But ridicule attacks all and destroys nothing.

… … …

"Despotism, in short, reigns in silence, and leaves man the right to be silent; usurpation condemns him to speak, it follows him into the inner sanctum of his mind and, by forcing him to lie to his own conscience, it robs him of the last consolation that still remains for the oppressed.

… … …

"Usurpation debases people at the same time that it oppresses them; it accustoms them to trample on what they used to respect, to woo what they despise, to despise themselves and, if it manages to endure over time, once it has fallen, it even cancels out any possibility of freedom, any improvement."[79]

These words certainly describe the transition from Stalin to Brezhnev far more than the fall of Commodus or the effects of the Napoleonic Empire, as Constant must have imagined. But they also herald the reign of those absurd legitimist usurpers whose murmurings would soon be discernible at the Congress of Vienna.

Benjamin Constant mentions in passing one of the bitterest and most incomprehensible truths for those contemporaries, such as Talleyrand, who had been born back in the age of *douceur*, when ridicule was fatal: "But ridicule attacks all and destroys nothing." Here he was naming one of the *arcana imperii* of Sovietism. And one of the main elements of political strength for the Soviet leaders was the very fact that they understood it. Excessive ridicule—its relentless, daily production—can lead to the total neutralization of its destructive power. And perfection is reached when anti-Soviet stories become a part of the regime. As for the results, these will be much more fruitful and lasting if all this is applied to a mind like that of the

Russian, who is a virtuoso when it comes to self-contempt, as Gogol and Dostoyevsky demonstrated.

The theory of legitimacy, through which Talleyrand triumphs at the Congress of Vienna, rests on two axioms of public law: "That sovereignty cannot be obtained simply through conquest; nor can it pass to the conqueror if the sovereign does not hand it over to him."[80] The first point, however, stopped all attempts to go back to the origin, since conquest casts a shadow over it: there is always a native ruler who has been overthrown. The second point offered no answer in situations where sovereignty is abandoned without being handed over: here a gap, a deficiency, appears, as in the silent law of nature compared with the written conventions that sanction it. In political reality a sanction is therefore needed—and it will be the "sanction of Europe." Europe appears here for the first time as a *second nature*, a mystical body ("an almost mystical community of states," as Guglielmo Ferrero would write) that has the power to confer sovereignty.[81] In conclusion: it was recognized that the laws of nature did not extend to all circumstances of life, but sometimes had to be supplemented and replaced by a second nature, identified as Europe. The aporia that the Congress of Vienna was trying to resolve was not so much political as epistemological. The political remedy was a shrewd fiction; as for the epistemology, it could wait. But the whole lack of plausibility was clear: not least because the body of Europe was not "mystical"—or no more so than Madame de Krüdener, prophetess of regeneration, who journeyed under the banner of the Holy Alliance. To cover this defect, after the Congress of Vienna there was a growing wave of declamation in support of Order, which has continued uninterrupted until today. Into those howling waters then came the ever more rabid declamation of the democratic and revolutionary enemy. Turning away from the contemplation of those insipid waves, Baudelaire gathered his *fleurs du mal* on the cliffs.

The right of conquest, which establishes its own laws, relates back to the arbitrary nature of language. Legitimate sovereignty relates back to the *lingua adamica*, to the sound that reveals the secret name of things. Now, the grammar of the Adamic language has never been reconstructed. And grammar is the action of language. The primacy of the praxis sought to wipe out even the memory of the Adamic language. But memory lasts longer than action.

Treacherous Trifles

It was certainly not reason, manipulated by unbelievers, that frightened Pascal. He could run it through with a few sword thrusts. What worried him, instead, was the credulity of the unbelievers: the inclination to abandon themselves to precariousness, being well aware of how precarious it was—faith kept whole in fleeting simulacra. An earlier believer, of that species to which Pascal could not and would not belong, wouldn't have felt so exasperated: he would have pointed to the world and the stars, would have invited us to heed the signs of a divine scheme that reverberated there.

Pascal shared with unbelievers the perception of the divine absence from the visible world. For him, the world could serve only as a theological catapult to project us into something that spurned contact with the world. But proof through absence is most difficult. Watching men rapt in their *divertissement*—their horrifying seriousness in stalking their prey as they hunted; or in trying out a dance step; or feeling a piece of cloth—he recognized in them the scorned image of ancient devotion, when the world's signs were enough to fill the soul with reverence.

Fénelon, in his implacable mildness, saw clearly the enemy of his spiritual counsels: "Within, you have to overcome your taste for a delicate life, your proud and scornful nature, along with your long tendency to dissipation," he wrote to the Comtesse de Grammont. That new form of evil might seem bland, and yet such an idiosyncratic vortex acted "like a torrent that sweeps everything away in spite of the best intentions."[82] Noble whim, hierarchical distance, now removed from all contact with the land, from all reciprocal feudal responsibilities, from all immediate function, but abandoned solely to the cruel game of favors at Court, now reemerged, and flared up again, to the point of a tacit fanaticism—in the development of taste, in the pursuit of sensitivity, in the gradual discovery of a uniqueness in style. And pride now came to govern all of this, as in the quarrel over a footstool, or for a place in a carriage. In each of those sudden, passionate

exasperations of sensibility Fénelon recognized "the breaches that the world has opened up."[83] And so the pleasures of conversation could become lethal —and virtually the most concrete and lasting image of ultimate Evil: "It will never be possible for you to abstain too sternly from the pleasures of social conversation."[84]

Pascal's *Pensées*, which are now read as a breviary of inner restlessness, were intended by the author as an arsenal of sharp, deadly weapons, to be unleashed upon the world. The vibrant urgency of the entries is not supposed to make the writing resemble the palpitations of the soul (how futile that would be!): it is the impatience of someone who wants to strike his blow an instant before that of his enemy.

Modernity is born when the eyes that watch the world see in it "this chaos and this monstrous confusion," but are not unduly alarmed—indeed, they are excited by the prospect of inventing a strategy for moving into that chaos, a new game that would make all that went before seem Ciceronian.[85] It is an impious view of which only mystics are capable (Pascal was foremost among them).

History, as we encounter it here, is "synoptic and simultaneous," it is the immense borderless carpet where "the most diverse and distant events can be brought together and tightly knotted before our eyes,"[86] where events and comments on events and the inventions around events and the ghosts of events remain perpetually bound together in a bed of torture and of pleasure, where forms and forces cannot be separated, where the eye is always aware of the "terrible danger of touching symbols."[87] Any judgment here is one thread lost among the tangle of knots in the carpet, and its only claim is that of adding its tenuous color to the overall weave.

Talleyrand: "There was something in Necker that prevented him from sensing, and fearing, the consequences of the measures he himself was taking. He was convinced he would have an all-powerful influence over the States General, that the members of the Third Estate in particular would heed him like an oracle, would see only through his eyes, would do nothing without his approval, and would not disobey him when using the weapons

he himself was putting into their hands. An illusion that was bound to be short-lived. Once toppled from that peak where his own amour propre had placed him, and from where he had flattered himself into thinking he was controlling events, he withdrew to his retreat to grieve over those evils he had not wanted to cause, over those crimes his integrity viewed with horror, but from which, if he had been more expert and less presumptuous, he could perhaps have saved France and the world.

"His presumption made him totally incapable of seeing that the movement that existed in France at that time was produced by a passion, or rather by the excesses of a passion shared by all men—vanity. Among almost all nations, it exists only in an inferior form, and represents just one aspect of the national character, or else it is directed firmly toward one single object, whereas with the French, as with their ancestors, the Gauls, it is mixed up with everything and dominates all things with an individual and collective energy that makes them capable of the greatest excesses.

"In the French Revolution, vanity wasn't the only guiding passion; it aroused other passions, which it summoned in support.[88] But these others remained subordinate; they took its color and its spirit, they acted on its behalf and for its ends. It gave the impetus and directed the movement to such an extent that it can be said the French Revolution was born out of vanity."

Benjamin Constant: "Nearly all men are obsessed with demonstrating they are something more than they are; the obsession of writers is to show they are statesmen. As a result, every great extrajudicial process, every use of illegal measures in situations of danger, century after century, has been recounted respectfully and described with satisfaction. The author, sitting peacefully at his desk, hurls his arbitrary ideas in all directions and attempts to introduce into his own style the same urgency that he recommends for the measures to be adopted; he believes for a moment that he holds power, as he preaches against its abuse; and his life of speculation is fired with the same demonstrations and strength and power that adorn his sentences; and in this way he gives himself some of the pleasures of authority, he yells out great words about salvation of the people, supremacy of law, public interest; he is awed by his own intelligence and amazed by his own energy. Poor fool! He is talking to men who are very happy to listen, and who, at the first opportunity, will try his theory out on him.

“This vanity, which has warped the judgment of many writers, has led to more problems than we realize in our civil conflicts.[89] All second-rate spirits, having obtained a share of authority, were inflated with all these maxims that appealed all the more to their stupidity since they were useful for cutting through the knots that couldn’t be unraveled. They dreamed of nothing else than precautions for public safety, great measures, coups d’état.”

Constant gives solid support for an idea that might seem like a paradox when we find it in Talleyrand—the idea that vanity had some relevance as a motivation behind the great events of the revolution. There is, in fact, a complicity between an emerging democratic half-wittedness and the blustering of certain *gens de lettres* who perhaps find themselves in a wretched position in society and now suddenly imagine they can rule the world from their desks. All this reaches its culmination and is reversed with Max Stirner. His predecessors were timorous, they felt the need to hide Whim behind some form of Good, and the first people they deceived were themselves. Stirner goes much further: he goes as far as to establish the most radical antisociality (as applied to the egoist and to the aphasic gang of egoists) as a reaction to the stifling pretense of pointing out to society what is its Good, compelling it to adhere to it.

Dismal Glory

While Napoleon’s armies were advancing toward Russia, an acrimonious war broke out between the Rebbes. The Rebbe of Lublin much preferred the oppressive rule of Alexander I to the enlightened ideas that Napoleon was supposed to be exporting. It is said that Napoleon one day saw the face of the Rebbe of Lublin appear before him: he was on the Russian front line pondering the strategy to eliminate the invaders. The Rebbe Rimanover, on the other hand, saw Napoleon as heralding the final battle before the advent of the Messiah. His thoughts turned once more to a possible acceleration of

time. And he wanted to aid Napoleon's victory with kabbalistic practices: he equated the baking of unleavened bread with the destruction of the Russian troops, ignoring the pleas of many Jewish mothers whose sons had enlisted. It is said that Napoleon described the Rebbe Rimanover as his strategist and presented him with a cloth to cover the Torah. But the last sign of Napoleon's impending defeat came during one Sabbath prayer, when the Rebbe of Kozhenits misread the words *nafol tippol* ("you will certainly fall") in Esther 6:13 as *Napol tippol* ("Napoleon will fall").

Faded by *légende*, funerary ornament of every glory, unnamable because too often named, his victims are still seated on the "finest systematic laws" proclaimed at the Luxembourg, *imperatoria brevitas*, evocation of a larval nature. "Fatigue, the camps, the night watches have made me fat," he wrote to Joséphine with his atrocious spelling, in his "badly formed" handwriting. "Horrible and impressive" were a good pair of adjectives: he used them in recalling the spectacle of that "miserable city"—Mantua—in flames.[90]

"A very shrewd observer, very calm, despite his fits of anger, which are mere subterfuges; a man of wit, if by wit we mean he understands the ignoble side of the heart; indifferent to good and bad, so that, in his impartiality, he would perhaps have preferred the first to the second, insomuch as more safe; he had moreover studied all the principles of tyranny, and it would have flattered his amour propre to have shown some sort of moderation as proof of his ability."[91]

Napoleon's legacy: the cult of will and the urge for control: a self-generated tension, a wind-up toy with a long spring. Control is illusory from the very start, but the machine it operates has nevertheless a majesty that encourages veneration.

Talleyrand's legacy: in the final touch given to things, in the comma that decides meaning (a precept of the Duc of Choiseul), in the almost imperceptible mark that style leaves behind, in the conviction that, generally speaking, *little* can be done, and this littleness might be due, if anything, to transient gifts such as the ear, the sense of *kairòs*, lightness, agility in breasting the waters of metamorphosis.

"His repugnance and scorn for those who call themselves philosophers are apparent on every occasion.[92] When he came to hear that events in

Naples were going badly, that people were dying of hunger, that the new Court had no money, he said coldly: ‘That’s their business; see what happens to countries governed by philosophers.’—There’s nothing more amusing than the way he treats Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, his ex-colleague at the Consulate. ‘So, Monsieur Sieyès, how’s the metaphysics going?’—‘What do philosophers have to say about all this, Monsieur Sieyès?’—that’s the tone he uses with him. Sieyès, for his part, withdraws into an impenetrable silence.” These quips about metaphysics, reported by Gentz, were among the more subtle pleasures that power gave to Napoleon. And there was one man who escaped such mockery: Talleyrand, a metaphysician disguised to everyone, including himself.

We are always somebody’s metaphysicians. The ideologist Sieyès was ridiculous in the eyes of Napoleon, but Napoleon appeared awkwardly archaic in the eyes of the financier Gabriel-Julien Ouvrard, since he had failed to recognize the power that would soon overshadow every empire—credit.

“Napoleon knew no sources of revenue other than taxation and conquest.[93] Credit for him was an abstraction; he saw in it only the dreams of ideology and the empty ideas of economists,” wrote Ouvrard. And once he even had the impudence to suggest to Napoleon what it was that would one day take his place: “He rose from his chair and, drawing me across to the window recess, he said: ‘Monsieur Ouvrard, you have lowered royalty to the level of commerce.’[94]—‘Sire, commerce is the accomplishment of states; it can do very well without royalty, whereas royalty cannot do without it.’ ”

The figure of Napoleon puts us in a quandary from the very outset: not just for the *légende* and for his excessive fame, of a kind that is entirely new and no longer Plutarchan, but because at a certain point we are compelled to recognize that, in the drama that is taking shape, he is indeed the historical incarnation of the principle of will, of the grand illusion that everything can be built up from zero. That zero point is the Revolution, and the Will is the Subject who speaks after it. Talleyrand is the other pole: from the very beginning he had recognized the mechanism of the unprecedented historical moment as something that was acting by itself. He concealed himself within it, content to tighten or loosen a screw here or there. Small “finishing touches” in which he recognized the last kind of action that was still

possible. Chateaubriand, convinced that he was being highly critical, wrote of Talleyrand: "He put his signature to events, he wasn't doing them."[95] This urge to "do," which is part of the more bombastic legacy of the nineteenth century, is something that Chateaubriand shares with his detested Napoleon. As for Talleyrand, it is certainly true that he claimed at most that he was "putting his signature" to events, but this didn't make him feel any inferior to someone else who was supposedly "doing them." Nor did he adapt to that role out of pride, or through calculation, but for reasons of ceremonial expedience, since he was by unquestionable vocation the Grand Chamberlain of history. But that signature, which was indeed a small "finishing touch," had no lesser weight than other more clamorous deeds, if we view the dusty cloud of events from a certain distance.

Napoleonic pomp, that imperial geometry that sought to divide the land into administrative quadrangles, has a subtle weakness from the very beginning: it is tainted by ghosts of the past. In a painting by Anne-Louis Girodet, the empty spaces of the sky begin to fill with psychic substances that have the face of death; their feet no longer rest on the ground but on the arms and fingers of dismembered souls. This to celebrate *The Apotheosis of the French Heroes Who Died for Their Country During the War for Freedom,* painted in 1802 (at a cost of 12,000 francs) to decorate the Salon Doré at Malmaison. But François Gérard evoked the same milky, opalescent substances with Ossian's harp, which ended up once again in the Salon Doré at Malmaison. And Jean-Pierre Franque let the pyramids exude a mist from which once again the ghosts of wide-eyed maidens emerged, barely able to carry the weight of their allegorical duty.

Talleyrand saw the prospects for Napoleon's political future from the time of the Battle of Marengo. He told the financier Ouvrard at that time: "Two paths open up for him: the federal system, which, after the conquest, leaves every prince as master of his own house, on terms favorable to the victor: so that today the First Consul could reinstate the King of Sardinia, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and so forth.[96] But what if, on the other hand, he wants to bring together, to incorporate? Then he takes a path that has no end to it." Talleyrand, through his innate wisdom, possesses a talent, the perception of limit, but he knows that the new political world is compelled toward the limitless. He knows also that by now "all the mechanisms

controlling the old political system are broken or about to break."[97] And yet Talleyrand's destiny is to move among *les affaires*, the metaphysical name for politics. He will have no hesitation therefore in choosing the path with no limit, that error spiced with novelty. The small courts of emigrants hold no attraction for him: they are a mistake that has already gone stale. Whereas it will be thrilling, and splendidly ephemeral, to create a coexistence between limit and the government of that person whose mission it was to cancel it. The relationship between Napoleon and Talleyrand is a fetish bristling with mirrors and nails. But in the obscurity of their relationship, one single point is obvious: the immense curiosity that attracted each to the other. For years they were seen trying not to make it apparent, like two stately beasts, brought from remote and incompatible climates and locked together in the same cage.

Who did Napoleon have to fear after the Battle of Austerlitz? On the evening of his victory he was staying, by fortunate coincidence, at the house of Prince Kaunitz, who had so humiliated the French ambassador during the Seven Years War and used to clean his teeth at table (Metternich would never have done such a thing). He had chosen to establish himself in Kaunitz's own room, into which there was a constant flow of "Austrian flags, Russian flags, messages from archdukes, messages from the Emperor of Austria, prisoners who bore the names of all the great families of the Empire."[98] The courier arrived with the post, "an event that, in war, is most pleasurable."[99] Napoleon asked Talleyrand to glance through it in his presence. Coded letters from foreign ambassadors in Paris, deciphered; police reports, banking matters. But there was also a long report from Madame de Genlis ("no one has been such a determined *écriveuse*"),[100] who reported various pointed comments heard "in the houses that were then called the faubourg Saint-Germain."[101] Various indomitable old ladies had once again been looking down on him. The letter and those remarks threw Napoleon "into a state of unimaginable rage.[102] He cursed, he railed against the faubourg Saint-Germain. 'Oh! They think they're stronger than me,' he said, '*Messieurs du faubourg Saint-Germain. We shall see! We shall see!*' " To remain steadfast to that challenge, years of military campaigning had to follow; and around a century later, for Proust, years of reclusion in a cork-lined cell.

The conqueror's footsteps echoed through the Tuileries on the day he took possession of the palace, in the company of Pierre Louis Roederer, a counselor of state at the time. "Come, my little Creole," he had said to Joséphine, "lie down on the bed of your masters." Roederer looked at the "old and somber tapestries and the darkness of the apartments." "General," he said, "this is dismal." And Bonaparte, knowing it would be immediately recorded among the counselor's papers, replied: "Yes, like glory."[103]

Education has this paradox: that it consists above all of things that cannot be learned—or of things that represent what cannot be learned. Napoleon wanted to be surrounded by it, since he knew that nothing existed without it: but he wanted it to be present in *one single* person, on whom, at the right moment, he could easily direct all his hatred. For Napoleon, Talleyrand was education insofar as he represented the past: the Rosetta Stone under the eyes of the conqueror. Everyone else in the imperial cortege was a desperate masquerader—but stiff, righteous, pompous, since they all feared ridicule. Napoleon's hidden wound was legitimacy, *and so*—with the false reasoning of sovereigns—he wanted to surround himself only with legitimate couples. He even forced Talleyrand, a bishop and a libertine, to marry. This brought an end to the carefree and bittersweet years in which "spouses in good society used to rarely see each other and never quarreled.[104] Since the time of Napoleon, husbands give themselves airs of self-importance, their pride has been reawakened by the whim of a despot who 'took the decision to adopt good manners' and ordered women never to appear in public without their husbands." Stendhal explained the reasons for all this to the incredulous English: "In establishing a new Court, this despot feared more than anything else the effects of ridicule, which in France is fatal for all it touches and would have arisen without doubt if its fledgling nobility had aped the follies and vices of the ancient nobility.[105] Desirous of avoiding the inconveniences that the frivolities and scandals of a licentious Court would have caused him in the midst of his important occupations, he therefore commanded, with his iron will, that orderliness and decency should be the order of the day."

But among these ladies now silenced, among these opportunists whose feet ached in their new shoes, there was one person who moved easily, nonchalantly, and alongside the heavy and dignified steps of the others he let that light, sardonic sound of his lame leg be heard. Talleyrand was the

only person who could strike Napoleon with the weapon against which the great strategist was defenseless: the weapon of *persiflage.* He was the only one who could address him tongue-in-cheek. Right to the end, when Talleyrand was in disgrace and many felt entitled to insult him without fear, Napoleon knew that the Prince was still the man who had once invited him, during the days of the Consulate, to go hunting at Auteuil. Stendhal, the most sympathetic of Napoleon's chroniclers, tells the story: "Talleyrand had a country house at Auteuil, a small village between the Seine and the Bois de Boulogne. 'I'll come and eat with you one of these days,' said Napoleon. 'I'd be most delighted, *mon général*,' replied Talleyrand, 'and since my house is just by the Bois de Boulogne, you could enjoy a little shooting in the afternoon.' 'I don't like shooting,' answered Bonaparte, 'but I do love hunting. Are there any wild boar in the Bois de Boulogne?' Bonaparte was still a young man and, having lived in Paris for only a short time, he didn't know that the Bois de Boulogne, like your Hyde Park, is just a place for walking and horse riding. It was obviously quite impossible to find wild boar there. But a Frenchman can never resist the idea of a joke, even at the expense of those to whom he pays the most servile court. Talleyrand, who prided himself on his nobility, could hardly avoid a certain feeling of displeasure at the sight of a humble artillery lieutenant rising to popularity and power, not through the influence of noble birth but by the vulgar means of intelligence and merit. His scurrilous nature therefore prompted him to play a mean trick on Napoleon; and when he asked if there were wild boar in the Bois de Boulogne, Talleyrand answered: 'Very few, *mon général*, but I dare say you'll manage to find one.' The meal and the hunting expedition were fixed for the next day and it was arranged that Bonaparte would arrive at Auteuil at seven in the morning. Talleyrand, fighting back his tears of laughter, had two large black pigs brought from the Paris markets. They were transported straight to the Bois de Boulogne by two servants who had orders to set them free and let them run about. Bonaparte reached Auteuil at the appointed time, accompanied by an aide-de-camp who was already most amused, since the general kept using hunting terms in the oddest way. After they had eaten, the company set off toward the Bois de Boulogne, with various hunting dogs borrowed from neighboring peasants. One of the pigs was at last set free and Bonaparte exclaimed in great delight: 'I see the wild boar!' Talleyrand, well aware that the animal wouldn't run immediately away from its pursuers, ordered a servant mounted on a small Spanish horse

and armed with a long whip to follow it. But Bonaparte was too intent on the hunt to notice this detail. And so he set off at a furious gallop in pursuit of the so-called wild boar, which, after a half-hour chase, ended up being taken by the hunters. The aide-de-camp, who by this point was beginning to work it all out and feared the story would be exposed to public ridicule, decided to undeceive the general and, stopping him, he said: 'Of course, sir, you do realize this is not a wild boar but a pig.'

"Bonaparte had a violent fit of rage. He galloped straight off toward Auteuil. He was no doubt preparing himself for a bitter exchange with Talleyrand, and words would probably have turned to action if he hadn't remembered that Talleyrand was intimately connected with Paris high society, which would have laughed at him if he had taken the story too seriously. Having reached Auteuil, he therefore decided to laugh it off and show he was amused by the joke, though he could barely conceal his anger. Incredible though it might seem, Talleyrand, who was in an excellent mood, immediately thought up the idea of making fun of him once again. 'Never mind, *mon général*, it's true the wild boar hunt was a disappointment. But it is still early. You needn't go back to Paris yet. There are plenty of rabbits in the Bois de Boulogne: Louis XVI often hunted them. Door locks and rabbits were that poor man's favorite pastimes! You well know he was an excellent shot.' 'Yes, but I'm a very poor shot,' said Bonaparte, whose good humor had not yet revived. 'Your ride must have given you an appetite,' continued Talleyrand. 'While you sit down and have something to eat, I'll have my guns fetched from Paris. They belonged to Louis XVI.'

"They remained at table for two hours, during which Talleyrand plied the future emperor with those elegant words of flattery that he was so skilled at dishing out. Servants were meanwhile sent to Paris with instructions to buy all the rabbits they could find. They gathered up at least five or six hundred and transported them to the Bois de Boulogne in various hired carriages. Bonaparte set off, armed with his gun, and accompanied once again by his aide-de-camp. 'I'm no Louis the Sixteenth,' he said. 'I'm certainly not going to kill a single rabbit.' Nonetheless he soon killed a fair number. The aide-de-camp, on seeing how seriously Napoleon was slaughtering the poor animals and continually talking about Louis XVI, could no longer restrain himself and burst out laughing. The fiftieth rabbit had at last been killed and Bonaparte seemed pleased with his success. The aide-de-camp could no longer hold back and, approaching his master, he whispered in his ear: 'In

truth, *mon général*, I'm beginning to think they're not wild rabbits. I have a nasty feeling that scoundrel of a priest has tricked us again.'

"Bonaparte, gripped by a violent fury, galloped back to Paris.[106] Six months passed before he made his peace with Talleyrand, and he probably threatened to take his revenge if Talleyrand had ever dared to mention the rabbit shoot or the wild boar hunt in the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Indeed, it is certain that these two stories never circulated in Paris." Even while he gazed at Moscow in flames, Napoleon knew that one eye saw him as a ferocious rabbit hunter.

Léon Bloy explained the link between Napoleon and Hitler in the plainest terms at a time when Hitler had not yet invented Nazism (it was 1912): "For anyone who sees into the Absolute, war has no sense unless it *exterminates*, and the very near future will prove it.[107] It is a folly or a hypocrisy to take prisoners. Napoleon was certainly neither a fool nor a hypocrite, but this supposed butcher was sentimental, always ready to forgive, magnanimous, and despite everything he believed in the magnanimity of others, and we know what price he paid for this incomprehensible illusion … He was not therefore the monster who would be needed for total, apocalyptic war, with all its consequences—the abyss of war invoked by the abyss of turpitude. And it seems obvious that he will not be the forerunner of this demon."

More than the Russian campaign (the scenario for a continuing contest between powers), it is the war in Spain that holds the key (still only partially understood) to Napoleon's secret, and prefigures the events that wait still to devastate the next chapter of history. The war in Spain is the first, victorious vendetta of weakness against strength. The grim mountain folk, "proud and filthy beggars," who cruelly bleed the French troops and were the first "to dare to fight as irregulars against the first modern regular armies,"[108] are not only the forebears of those Partisans (later guerrillas, then terrorists) who wreak havoc in every strategic and legal ambit, as Carl Schmitt has shown, but they are the precursors of a dark and terrible figure whose face is beginning to appear only now: ethnic revolt, the rejection of the West as a soft epidermis that covers all lands and is suffocating them.[109] At ever closer intervals, that epidermis is slashed, as happened in Iran with the ousting of the Shah and the murderous fury of the *mostazafin*, the dispossessed urban poor, who take us back to the Partisans. Behind the

Partisan is the Poor Man. And it is the overlapping of these two figures that creates their irresistible capacity to penetrate—as well as their self-deception: because the Partisan will tend (has always tended, without realizing it) to serve a "third interest," which in the end subtly undermines the rebels, reducing them to its meek agents (but will it always be like this?);[110] whereas the Poor Man will tend (has always tended) to seize the arms of the Rich so as to be tyrannized even more severely by other Poor Men. That venomous revolt, that rejection of the West, carried out by exploiting all the detritus of the West, all its words broken down into sharp fragments, is a belated, angry response to the project that Léon Bloy's theological sarcasm described as "the lofty idea of a general immolation of the destitute."[111] Modernity, in its pure form, seeks to wipe out the Poor. Indeed, at its most brazen, it wants the Poor to be wiped out by the Poor themselves. So it seems appropriate that the worst massacres have taken place in Soviet Russia, where, for many years, the Poor have persecuted themselves. But in history this phenomenon—whose rumblings we are only just beginning to recognize today from every point of the horizon and which will soon invade us from within and from without—first emerged during the war in Spain. Napoleon understood the military significance of the Partisan (if only in the words "It is necessary to operate like partisans wherever there are partisans"), but he refused to accept the new power heralded by the merger between Poor Man and Partisan. And this was also why the war in Spain was such a disaster. Napoleon, in that case, was neither able nor willing to understand. He was not willing to understand because he was under the illusion suffered by those who actually know human horror: the belief that such horror is the same everywhere, and therefore that the same cold strategies that had already worked well in Italy and elsewhere should have worked in Spain. As Madame de Rémusat observed: "one of Bonaparte's great faults … was to mix all men together, holding an equal view of them, and failing to understand the differences that ways and customs bring in their characters."[112] He failed to understand because he was himself the extension of something that, from then on, would continually spread its invulnerable gloss over the earth. The Poor Man who wants to remain as such, the Poor Man who wants just to continue to exist, who prefers his land as it is, rather than having his land developed, the "ungrateful beggar" who insults the hand that is ready to give the money: these people are the scandal, the obstacle (for Napoleon, for the

world that followed him); they are the most insolent image of material resistance (therefore of "human material," which is now the subject par excellence), of opaqueness, of impenetrability, heralding the savage revolt of the land against its swift, impatient surveyor. Napoleon can be accused of one single crime, observed Bloy, who had no fear of risking the blasphemous mixture of *Légende* and Vulgate: he introduced "a famous code where it is taken for granted that the poor do not exist."[113] Not only that: he had dared to say: "I consider it of great importance and a great idea of glory to destroy beggary." The bloody repercussions of that act have not yet ended: "*Beggary is forbidden*.[114] He had canceled out the Poor Man and that was his crime—which was then perpetuated."

"The Mysterious Force of Legitimacy"

A vicious circle: legitimacy is the only force that assures lasting government; but for a government to become legitimate it must already have lasted for a long time.

"The revolutionary spirit is correct when it states that the principles of legitimacy are limited, conventional, fluctuating, easily undermined by reason: we, too, admit this.[115] And nor is it wrong when it affirms that such principles appear fair and true only because men, in debating them, never go beyond a certain point, past which their weakness would be revealed. But it deceives itself, and shows an ignorance of the world that it periodically reduces to ruin, when it confuses these principles with all the fragile conventions that fill the life of society. These principles, however fragile, do differ from the others because they contain a magical virtue: as soon as men are tempted by the Devil to break them, they are smitten by fear; the sacred fear of the broken rule."

"The innermost nature of the principles of legitimacy is the power to exorcise fear."[116]

On July 25, 1820, Talleyrand wrote to the Duchess of Courland from Valençay, where the legitimate king, whom he had led to the throne, compelled the mind of Talleyrand "not to occupy himself with anything he's good at doing." His letter contained an esoteric codicil: "The mysterious force of legitimacy is being lost because it has not been understood.[117] All men of revolution reduce it to being a means for preserving the power of kings, whereas it is most of all a factor necessary for the peace and happiness of the people, whereas it is the most solid and, I would say, the only guarantee for the existence of nations and for their continuance. Legitimacy of kings, or rather legitimacy of governments, is the safeguard of nations and that is why it is sacred …"

At the very moment when Talleyrand is expounding the principle of legitimacy, and measures his whole action upon it, he casually fails to put it into practice. The armistice of April 23, 1814, is signed by him without any authority: the King has not yet reached Paris, and the involvement of the Senate is, in everyone's view, an extremely fragile gimmick. But Talleyrand wants to move *ahead* of the King, who would make negotiations more difficult for him. His secret thought is *la légitimité, c'est moi.* Later, there will always be time for sham diversions, such as when he writes in his *Mémoires* that he had signed the armistice in his quality as minister appointed by the King.

This secret thought was certainly not far from the truth—and nor did it respond to some sort of dark egomania, which would have been contrary to his style. Instead, once again, it anticipated a simple fact. At the Congress of Vienna, Talleyrand realized that Wellington and Castlereagh were indeed finding it difficult to comprehend the meaning of that word "legitimacy." As for the court of Louis XVIII, it could only resemble that of Ubu, as Bloy would have recognized. But the final confirmation would come a few years later, with the revolution of the parvenus. Louis Philippe, despite being an Orléans, waited nervously to be recognized by the European courts. He had sent colonel Atthalin to St. Petersburg with a signed letter announcing his accession to the throne. Nicholas I let fifteen days pass before replying. What was all that business about barricades, tocsin bells, and shootings? But one day he read in the *Moniteur* that Talleyrand had been appointed ambassador to London. And that seemed enough for him. He said: "Since

Monsieur Talleyrand has sided with the new French government, this government must necessarily have good prospects of lasting."[118] Then, at last, colonel Atthalin was given an answer. The Tsar of all the Russias recognized the new King of the French. He had found his legitimacy in a newspaper article.

The tumultuous history of Western transformation is all a sequence of "theological insurrections."[119] The narrative of *auctoritas* and *potestas*—how they are separated after Melchizedek, how they join forces and then clash with each other, how one subordinates, nourishes, and defines the other in their relationship with the gods of the cosmos or in their relationship to a single god beyond the cosmos, how they divide the earth and heaven between them, how *auctoritas* is finally absorbed into *potestas*, but injects it with that spiritual venom that will henceforth make it demonic—is primarily a sequence of theological glosses.

The mechanics who built, oiled, and started up the unwieldy modern machine were theologians. Then they quietly withdrew. All that remained now was to observe its most banal aspect: the transformation into facts, the procession of revolutions. All modern artificialism, which is by far the most effective device for operating on the world and developing power, finds the seal of its tortuous history not in some secular empiricist but in Calvin. According to the definition of Louis Dumont, that artificialism is "the systematic application of an extrinsic, imposed value to the things of the world."[120] In order to operate on this world with such sharp knives, it is necessary for the action to originate in something that is outside the world: and it is Calvin himself who fixes that element of will as arbitrary power derived from God, who is "the archetype of the will."[121] Something that does not belong to the world—and will soon wish to ignore its own origin—is placed at the center of the world and rattles, claws, and fumbles around in it. The most devastating effects of this Will tend to happen when no one remembers any longer that the origin of that power is outside the world, since it is no longer customary to talk about something outside the world—and all that remains is to submit to its action without recognizing it. From theology one moves to a kind of black magic whose source cannot be discovered. For that source is *in coelestibus*. And so, in all his paroxysms, in all his claims for autonomy, in his every peremptory and tentative gesture, "what we call the modern 'worldly individual' has within him,

concealed in his inner constitution, an unperceived but essential element of extra-worldliness."[122] And yet everything takes place as if that dazzling crystal, that almond buried deep in the psyche, did not exist. *Graecum est, non legitur*: but that unread language is the language that remains active.

Talleyrand traces his ancestors back to the legendary Aldebert. Around the year 1000—so the story goes—Hugh Capet asked him: "Who made you a count?" and Aldebert replied: "Who made you king?"—a very early allusion to the particular intimacy the Talleyrand family always enjoyed with the *arcana imperii.* A dangerous question for every sovereign is his origin. A question that Aldebert answered with impudence, and by doing so he showed himself to be a sovereign. As for the secret of sovereignty, it is alluded to in the motto of the counts of Périgord: *Re que Diou*, "None other than God" (a different interpretation, but meaning the same in the end, is: "No other king than God"). Sovereignty can be attacked by tracing back to its origin, but sovereignty wins its contest when it refuses to give an account of itself, except to something ("Diou") on which no one can reckon. This is the origin of that arcane truth formulated by Disraeli: "Never explain."

The elderly princess Izabela Czartoryska had begun work on the catalogue raisonné of her treasures and curiosities, which included a small book where Vauban had sketched out projects for fortifications, a lock of hair belonging to Agnès Sorel, Madame de la Vallière's prayer book, and a series of autographs of all the rulers of France from François I to Napoleon. In the evening, after her usual stroll around the park, she allowed the young Countess Potocka to ask her questions. She spoke now of that time when she slipped into the study of Frederick the Great, a few moments after he had left it: "Before a table covered with papers and maps, a plate of cherries with a note in the king's writing: *I am leaving eighteen of them*.[123] To one side, an old hussar uniform lying over a chair was waiting for someone to come and repair it. Close to a letter from Voltaire, left open, the bill from a grocer who supplied the Court. A score thrown untidily on a music stand and, not far away from this general disorder, a curule seat, of the sort you would find at the Campidoglio, with the difference that one was painted dark red whereas this is made of rough wood, and nothing could hide its ignoble purpose." This was the last still-life of absolute power.

Arcana Imperii

In the beginning, power was spread in one place, aura and miasma.
Then it was brought together in Melchizedek, priest and king.
Then it was divided between a priest and a king.
Then it was brought together in a king.
Then it was divided between a king and a law.
Then it was brought together in law.
Then law was divided into many rules.
Then the rules were spread about in every place.

The Origins of Sweetness

The fires of Beltane, described by Frazer: “After the custard is eaten up, they divide the cake into so many portions, as similar as possible to one another in size and shape, as there are persons in the company.[124] They daub one of these portions all over with charcoal, until it be perfectly black. They put all the bits of the cake into a bonnet. Every one, blindfold, draws out a portion. He who holds the bonnet, is entitled to the last bit. Whoever draws the black bit, is the *Devoted* person who is to be sacrificed to *Baal* …”

Wittgenstein notes: “The fact that for drawing lots they use a cake, has something especially terrible (almost like betrayal through a kiss).”[125]

—When finally we began asking ourselves what was the taste of the slice of cake daubed with charcoal …
—The philosopher spoke about qualities, but not about what the single qualities are … What is sweetness?

The slice of cake in the Beltane rite is the *méros*, which is the *moīra*, the part that is fate. But it is important for the lots drawn here to remain linked to a thing, not just to a calculation, as in a counting-out game, which is fate without substance. By eating his own piece of cake, the Beltane carline eats himself, his own fate. What happens in his mouth will be repeated in the fire.

"Where you presently are, you can at least enjoy the *douceur* of not hearing discussion about [public] affairs": Marie Antoinette in a letter of April 1787.

In a language that tended to become dry and insipid, some words were charged with radiance, becoming more variegated in meaning than ever before. *Douceur*: from sweetness to delight to pleasure to slowness to softness to mildness to languor to kindness to smoothness. It is useless trying to define what became concentrated in that word during certain years, for certain people.

If fate is the indivisible part, sacrifice can only be performed by pretending to be a whole. The Beltane "company" pretends to be one single being, and pretends that this being is a whole: the cake divided into so many equal portions. It can then give up *one* portion of it, which is not *its own* portion of it. To respond to the divine sacrifice, which takes place within a whole, the human sacrificers pretend they have a totality and all-powerfulness. The only mark that betrays them: the black on the slice of the person Consecrated and Damned (*Devoted*).

"Thanks to such a long-lasting peace and such perfect leisure, civilization had reached an extreme *douceur*."[126] The story of progress is divided into two stages, separated by an interval of sacrifice. In the first stage, for the more enlightened minds the idea of progress never departed from that of a gradual mellowing. From a raw and rough material, by polishing and filling, delicately grinding, a perfection would be reached without harm or detriment. But what is the next moment? If perfection is the perfect baking of the Beltane cake, the next moment is the drawing of lots for the sacrifice. The cake of the indolent, which had itself emitted all *douceur*, is cut with blind equity by the guillotine. Acting in the heart of progress was the demon of the unlimited; meanwhile in the heart of *douceur* was nausea. Once

having reached the equilibrium of *bon ton*, all that is left is a headlong degeneration. The smoothest language also becomes the most inert; the sharpest arrow—the *bon mot*—becomes a professional tool in the tainted air of the press room. After the Revolution, history becomes one of a development that has lost the patina of *douceur*.

After the Revolution, progress forgets *douceur*. Its heart, inhabited by the demon of endless advance, has no wish for it. Its reason, which now claims to be based on the Revolution, and therefore on the moment when *douceur* was killed off, has no wish for it. And the immense misunderstanding of reason wanted the sacrificial victim to be seen as the Enemy. Even its legacy could have brought contagion. When the very memory of *douceur* is eradicated, when all of history becomes *son et lumière* and no longer a coexistence with dark protective shadows, then certain affable and dreary expressions such as "leisure time" and "quality of life" will appear, in the same way that people had begun talking of "landscape" when nature had already been defaced.

The nausea produced by excessive sweetness marks the moment when the sacrifice should occur. Nausea arises from the feeling of guilt at having avoided the sacrifice.

The *state of sweetness* is not stable: an occasional fleeting and insidious perfection, the *dulcedo* of mystics. When it becomes lasting, sweetness demands to be devoured. Sweetness ends under the knife of sacrifice, sexual pleasure in a spasm.

Douceur is the patina spread over life, making it livable; it is the dust on the wings of the butterfly. To produce it involves long alchemical care: slow cooking, gentle heat. But there is always fire, which seeks in the end to kill.

Douceur eventually shrinks to a murmur, a voice that, in the words of Céline, seeks to "gently gather the kindly spirits of the dead."[127] It inadvertently escapes the murderous oppression of the world, "with its constrained, insistent, besmirched characters clinging to their desires, to their passions, to their vices, to their virtues, to their explanations."[128] Ellipses mark the empty spaces in a lace of shadows: "… talking, after that, more gently to things …"[129]

When the Duchesse de Saint-Simon was appointed lady-in-waiting to the Duchesse de Berry she was given apartments at Versailles: an antechamber and five rooms, into which the only daylight to enter came through the front door. In the most secluded part of those rooms, the Duc de Saint-Simon established "sa boutique." He could neither read nor write there without candles, even in the middle of the day. In the great empty idleness that had been forced upon him he heard the crash of falling ranks. Hunched in his stone hovel, he asked himself, throughout the first five years that he labored on his *Mémoires*, if what he was doing was not impious. And so his first reader was a friend from the Court, though not someone from the far end of another Versailles corridor but Abbot Rancé at the monastery of La Trappe. The Regent, who knew Saint-Simon no less than Saint-Simon knew him, saw him as "unchangeable as God and fiercely tenacious." The Regent was an excellent reader, and loved Rabelais when everyone else considered him gothic. And so it was his task, without knowing it, to write down those words like a cartouche beneath the most recent delusion of omnipotence: that of the writer who has shut out the world in order to possess its specter with a rapaciousness that no man of power could match. Moving away from Versailles, that dissimulated yearning had only to find protection among Proust's cork-lined walls.

CHEVALIER DE B***: Don't imagine that Monsieur de Maistre was a harsh bigot, worried by darkening times. He was a brilliant talker—and most of all he wanted the sound of his words to echo as far as the great city of Paris, where he would set foot too late. He wanted his words to travel far around those salons that had harbored *esprit* in everything that seemed execrable to him, and which were therefore the only appropriate places to receive them.

His pole star was an opinion that did not belong to the rabble of spirits. He saw the people around him as being alien to all that is most noble, most tender, most sublime. At best, they could at times be right. He often awoke with a thirst for revenge, with his sword drawn. He would immediately stir himself into a state of fury, wanting to destroy everything. From the first time he appeared to me, behind a moonlit balustrade, at St. Petersburg, where I had finally been cast by the storm of the revolution in my country and a multitude of strange events, I

> regarded him as the most exemplary gentleman of intelligence that life had offered me.
>
> I had spent the years of my adolescence under the leather strap of the fathers of Vendôme: but all I can hear now is the hum of the refectory, like an army of cicadas, and the solitary voice of a preacher, who still mimicked the mild unction of Massillon. I was still not ready to meet someone in whom religious spirit and military spirit came together with equal fervor. As soon as I met Monsieur de Maistre he invited me to take occasion from my recollections of France to consider the multitude of great culprits who sacrificed themselves at each other's hands with supernatural precision. In his view, one fact alone remained unchanged in the history of the universe: the spilling of human blood. Once I even found myself thinking he was mad, when he asked, fixing me in the eye: "If we had records of massacres in the same way that we have meteorological records, do you think we might perhaps discover their inner law, after a few centuries of observations?" But he saw immediately that I was confused, and he tried almost to apologize with that immense kindness that tempered certain terrifying words: "I only find myself thinking about these things because, as long as I have been thinking, I think of war."

Nothing makes Joseph de Maistre more furious than the pretension that something of significance can be decreed by human arrangement, convention, stratagem. For him, *factice, artificial*, is the worst of insults. When the Americans decide to build their capital on the basis of a resolution, Maistre shudders as if in the face of some iniquity. And he immediately adds: "You could bet, one thousand to one, that the city will not be built, or that it will not be called *Washington*, or that the Congress will not reside there."[130] History has then taken care to ensure he would lose his sweeping bet: but this is not an indication of Maistre's blindness but confirmation of what terrified him. What most disturbed him was *improbability*, the apparent frailness of the evil that he saw spreading: whereas the truly satanic element lay in the fact that it was precisely that improbability that threatened to become fixed as a permanent situation—which is what then happened. Although he didn't wish to admit it for fear of compromising his anathemizing fury, Maistre foresaw that *man*—that aberration for whom republican legislators labored, that empty word: "*Man*

now simply doesn't exist in the world"—could survive, and for a long time, with no land, with no roots, with no notion of an unwritten law, with no longing for "that indefinable quality that is called *dignity*."[131, 132] Indeed, he could easily cancel out those memories, like a vague dream. And this would be the most alarming moment, since "if Providence *erases* something, it certainly does so in order to write."[133]

Such new writing would be recorded on flesh that had no memory and would demand a far greater amount of bloodshed, marking the beginning of a world that was no longer largely uninhabited, no longer with vast expanses of wilderness, but overrun and overexploited by the excesses of civilization.

Aldebert von Chamisso, poet and botanist, journeyed the world with Count Nikolai Rumyantsev. Their ship, the *Rurik*, arrived one day at an island that was not marked on the maps. On landing, they soon imagined they were the first foreign crew to have set foot in those parts. The natives proved docile. They worshipped an idol. Chamisso was allowed to see it. A woman smiled out from a framed etching. Chamisso recognized her wonderful face as that of Juliette Récamier, in a painting by Jean-Baptiste Isabey. He asked how that etching had been washed up on the island, but to no avail. The natives wouldn't say: they considered it blasphemy to talk about the origin of the gods.

Eulogius

A gnostic history, which we lack, is largely made up of what Louis Massignon termed *intersignes*, portents, coincidences (as historians describe them, in order to ignore them), erratic forms, buried relics, physiognomic marks, latent constellations in the sky of thought.[134] Metternich and Charles Nodier were educated at Strasbourg within a few years of each other, under the shadow of Eulogius Schneider, the erudite and sanguinary Capuchin monk. And, once again in Strasbourg, Metternich

took fencing lessons from the same master who had instructed Bonaparte. Nodier tells how his father, "who had a passion for classical studies, had decided to make a scholar of me"—and using his own personal method.[135] By the age of ten, his son could read the Latin authors with an ease he would never later regain. But now he had to move on to Greek. And so he was entrusted to Schneider, with whom his father had been in correspondence as "the learned publisher of a German *Anacreon*."[136] The young Nodier, a bookish dreamer, discovered that his tutor was a tyrant "driven to the ultimate consequences by the logic of extermination."[137] His revolutionary society, La Propagande, practiced appalling hatred, at the tail end of that "long pink-footed idyll that had been the eighteenth century."[138] Dragged before the spectacle of the guillotine, Nodier listened to one of Schneider's followers from La Propagande speaking "with a choice of expressions so charmingly frightening, with an *anacreonism* so desperate that I could feel a cold sweat trickling down my forehead and bathing my eyelids."[139] Metternich had had a tutor "whose name is consecrated to the malediction of Alsace": he would become a member of Eulogius Schneider's revolutionary tribunal.[140] And his professor of canon law, on becoming constitutional bishop of Strasbourg, would appoint the same Eulogius Schneider as vicar general. Schneider then "recanted religion and his episcopacy and, in a revolutionary orgy, publicly burned the emblems of his office."[141] Metternich, in recalling those two godless masters more than fifty years later, while writing a fragment of his memoirs for his family archive, was eager to point out, however, that they had "never forced me to change my opinions."[142]

The young Nodier, down from the Jura Mountains, reached Strasbourg at night and took accommodation at the Hôtel de la Lanterne, run by Madame Tesch, who gazed at him tenderly: to her, the young boy looked like a girl in disguise. He slept little: "By daybreak I was wandering the empty streets, amazed by everything, and gripped by a kind of ecstasy in front of that magnificent cathedral, which the ancient world would have included among its marvels.[143] Never in my life had I seen anything like that choir of angels and saints which was surrounded by myriad figures that seemed to rise up to the heights of celestial Jerusalem, rising among the rich transparent embroideries and lace of its miraculous architecture. A hammer blow tore me from my meditation, and I saw the head of a saint roll to my feet. There

was another resounding blow and this time the bust of the Virgin fell with child in arms. I tried to fathom where all this was coming from, and could see a man perched in the portal, on the shoulders of an enormous apostle, hammering left and right, uttering frightening curses against those gothic portrayals of the Lord's elect. People gradually gathered in excited groups, from which there were bursts of laughter, dark utterances and dull murmurs. It took me quite some time to make sense of that frenzy, which hadn't yet reached the foothills of the Jura."

Madame Tesch immediately explained to her guest that Abbé Schneider was now called Citizen Schneider, and it was now imperative that his young pupil address him in familiar terms. These opening words were already enough to disturb Nodier. The pupil was received by a surly servant girl. "Breakfast was served. It was a plate of oysters, *rara concha in terris*, a plate of anchovies, a bowl of olives, and a tankard of beer. Citizen Schneider came in, laid his two pistols on the table, and, after a curt greeting to me, sat down.

"I approached and handed him my father's letter.[144] After the first two lines he took my hand, addressing me with I don't know what phrase in Greek, to which I replied that I didn't yet have the fortune to know a word of Greek; he then invited me for lunch and, upon my refusal, to dinner. I had no reason to decline. Nevertheless, I would have preferred to dine at Madame Tesch's."

Citizen Schneider makes his appearance: "He was a man of thirty-five, ugly, fat, short and ordinary, with rounded limbs, round head.[145] What made him most unusual was his livid gray face, with red blotches here and there, and the contrast between his black, short-cropped hair and his dark bushy eyebrows, under which flashed two wild eyes, shaded by light brown lashes. Endowed with an immense aptitude for learning, and a spirit full of irony, along with which I invariably found cruelty, there was nothing about him that stirred any feeling, any emotion, nothing that touched the heart." The first rule that Nodier's Greek teacher laid down was that he should in no circumstances mix with "popular society," as Saint-Just called it, since it was "infected by the Convention's evil principles of *moderatism*."[146]

As for Saint-Just, in his icy dandyism, he did not approve of the learned, predatory Capuchin. “The leading figure in Strasbourg,” wrote Michelet, “was the ex-Capuchin Schneider, well-versed in ancient literature, formidable in his German tongue and a zealous preacher, a spiritual advisor adored by women. Even today, in this city where a story of loathing has built up around him, certain women (now elderly) are not yet consoled.

“Schneider was a rabid democrat in the mould of the old Anabaptists, of John, the tailor king of Leyden, who sought to compete with Solomon for the number of women. This monk was insatiable: not satisfied with the women who ran after him of their own accord, we are assured that he took women wherever he went.

“Nevertheless, he wanted a wife, and had just married one by force and by terror. He returned to Strasbourg in the evening, in great pomp, in a four-horse carriage. It was late for a city at war; the gates were shut, he had them opened. Saint-Just takes advantage of this situation, namely Schneider’s aristocratic behavior with his carriage and retinue, and has him captured that same night in his marriage bed. Strasbourg can hardly believe its eyes the following morning at the sight of its tyrant tied to the guillotine. He remained there for three hours, in that wretched position, and left it only to be sent to Paris, to his death.

“While he was displayed like that, Saint-Just was seen to appear on the balcony overlooking the square, and to watch his suffering with haughty indifference.[147] The Catholic population, witnessing the humiliation of that renegade, recognized the hand of God and heaped blessings on God’s and Robespierre’s envoy.”

Young Nodier was there that day, at the square in Strasbourg, in front of Saint-Just’s balcony. He describes what really happened. Schneider had decided to marry in the hope that his religious past, about which he was still reminded, might be completely forgotten. He had chosen the pretty daughter of an Alsatian aristocrat whom he had put into prison. He had noticed her among the crowd of supplicants. He released the father and forced him to invite him for lunch. The daughter had remained in her rooms. Schneider ordered that she take part in the banquet and, in her presence, asked for her hand. Before any answer had been given, he rose from the table and went across to the open window. Outside they were building the guillotine. The girl begged her father to accept the marriage

proposal and, turning to her future husband, she, too, made a proposal: she wanted to be married straightaway, but in Strasbourg, not in that small town of theirs, so that the marriage would be a glorious occasion and everyone could forget the mistresses that Schneider had till then dragged behind him. The suitor agreed. Schneider made his entry into Strasbourg the next day, preceded by his hussars of death, in a carriage drawn by six horses, sitting beside his radiant bride-to-be, followed by a low red cart on which his mobile guillotine was mounted, and finally a small carriage where the executioner sat—a pale, gaunt, serious man on whom all eyes were fixed. It was three thirty in the afternoon, a few minutes after the gates were due to close.

The procession was passing beneath his balcony when Saint-Just appeared. "In his manner there was a sort of stern brusqueness: he didn't look for popular acclaim; indeed, he discouraged it, with a dry peremptory gesture.[148] And yet his thick and heavily powdered hair over his straight black eyebrows, his head erect above his high and full cravat, the dignity of his tiny build, the elegance of his simple dress, never failed to have their effect upon the multitude. He signaled for the procession to stop, and everyone halted."

His anger was already visible through his "shining and intense" gaze. But, before he could speak, Schneider's betrothed fell to her knees on the ground: "Justice, justice, citizen! I appeal to Saint-Just and to the Convention!" In a few words, she told her story. The executioner confirmed it, declaring that he had been ordered to be ready in case the aristocrat had refused to grant his daughter's hand. Finally, Schneider's bride even asked for clemency. Saint-Just then became furious: "Clemency! Clemency for the Capuchin of Cologne! Off to the guillotine!" he continued with an outrage barely credible in a character so methodical and so composed. "Let him be taken to the guillotine!" "Do I have to cut off his head?" the gaunt man in the small carriage respectfully asked. "I have no right to order it," said Saint-Just, quivering with irritation. "May he go to the death that that monster has invented! Tie him to the guillotine till further orders!"[149]

Shortly after, Nodier saw Schneider, with "small eyes as if molten in their orbits," being led to the guillotine, goaded by the swords of his hussars of death. Around him were waves of shouting. Nodier was jostled more and more by the crowd and couldn't see over their heads. But he heard the

words of a volunteer from the south who towered over everyone else and felt it his duty to describe to his neighbors what he could see.

Metternich knows he has to find the most effective and economical way of running a drafty old house with rusty window frames and blocked pipes: Talleyrand has never identified himself with any house: even when he is wearing his finest uniforms, a part of him is always on the highway, playing in the fields dressed in rags, as his uncle had once seen him as a child. He has never *set foot* in his father's house. Something deep within makes him feel close to the downtrodden, the rootless, enables him to understand the new, the barbarous new, and to devise mutable strategies to ensure that it might end up, in its turbulent course, following one particular direction and not others.

Metternich was the great curator of the museum of Europe: like every clear-thinking curator, he knew his work could last only a certain time. Talleyrand, on the other hand, is aiming at survival, he moves between temporary residences, regularly auctions off his books and objects of value. He retains only his style, since he knows this is his single unfailing weapon for survival. Those who yield and adopt the style of the moment are killed the moment after. Like a Tao master, Talleyrand doesn't exclude the possibility that survival might be infinite. But, if he does have to die, he knows it has to be accepted naturally. And, then too, he seeks to keep his style one last time. "He died as one who knows how to live," one lady commented. Talleyrand always held the view that the passage of time was murderous in itself—and the whole art of politics was now one of surviving the grip of events. And so his work lasts longer than that of Metternich: the legacy of the past is not guaranteed by its ability to be restored, but by its capacity to escape a sentence that has already been passed, deferring death moment by moment.

"What is history? Specification.[150] The more that history specifies, clarifies, characterizes, the more it is history, the more it is itself." His *Histoire de la Révolution française* accompanied Michelet day and night for nearly ten years. He wrote the last two volumes in total solitude, near Nantes: "For my voluntary exile, I chose the capital of our civil wars; I

wanted to end my book between Brittany and the Vendée."[151] The crucial step was that of locking up his library in Paris, taking away "only the sources strictly necessary." And so Michelet withdrew to a place that was immune from the chronic contagion of *other* books, those "silent witnesses" that, due to their mere presence, remain in a state of complicity with diverging worlds and obstruct the exact hallucination. One Sunday in May, toward ten in the morning, before his departure, Michelet wanted to visit the principal museum of the *Terror.*

"By this I don't mean Clamart, where Mirabeau is, with Madame Roland —I don't mean the Madeleine, where, along with the king, were the Girondins, Charlotte Corday; I don't mean Picpus, where André Chénier sleeps, along with the French nobility; nor Bourg-la-Reine, where Condorcet lies. I'm referring to Mousseaux.

"It is the cemetery of Danton and Robespierre, of Camille Desmoulins, of Saint-Just, of Anacharsis Clootz, of Lavoisier.

"The weather, in contrast to these lugubrious recollections, was sunny, mild, already bringing blossom, it was the weather of a warm spring day caressed by breezes.

"Nature is forgetful! But France is all the more so! This place of death where the earth drank the blood of the nation, the very life of the Republic, what has become of it? 'A hostelry outside the gate, a drinking house?' No, a meeting place of disrepute, where there is dancing! France dances cheerfully on its dead!

"This ground, planted with young trees, is a remote corner of the old orchard that once formed part of the Mousseaux estate. A park, once owned by the Duc d'Orléans, laid out in English style at the end of the eighteenth century, shabbily decorated with rococo architecture, with fake ruins that have now become real, is charming but extremely sad. It was where Marie Antoinette last strolled (on June 20), and Robespierre, in his darkest days in Prairial and Messidor, often carried his frenzied agitation about with him. Later it was a place of celebration. In June 1848, Mousseaux was the center of the national *ateliers*: their sudden dissolution would drown Paris in blood.

"The corner of the orchard described here, purchased in 1784 by the *Ferme générale* as land needed for the new city walls of Paris, then acquired by the municipality in February 1793, was an ordinary cemetery for some time, divided into four sections.

"Suppressed as such, and cleared, it was sold, conveyed to the Marquis d'Aligre, one of the richest men in France, who, most probably unaware of all of this, rented out half of it so that they could build this meeting place; the remainder, closer to the city wall, is divided into small stony gardens where the Parisians fancy themselves cultivating flowers."[152]

L'Autrichienne

Marie Antoinette: "a frightening destiny, sown throughout with *intersignes*."[153] She approached the point where the meanings were too many (and would later overwhelm her) when, as a fourteen-year-old betrothed in marriage, she arrived at Strasbourg in a glass carriage. The crippled, the elderly, and the diseased were kept hidden, as they had been for the young Buddha. An island in the middle of the Rhine was where the masters of ceremony had arranged for the archduchess to be handed over, naked, into the hands of her husband's envoys. A building had been specially erected to receive her and its rooms decorated with tributes to the future queen. The magnificent large tapestries in the main hall were France's inaugural gift to her.

Goethe, a young law student, stopped there several times before Marie Antoinette's procession reached the city. Setting foot in the great hall, he was appalled. "It was hung with many splendid, sumptuous tapestries, surrounded by heavy ornaments and modeled on pictures by French painters of the moment.[154] Now, I would no doubt have found a way of appreciating even this fashion, since it was most rare for my sensibility and my judgment to reject something altogether; but here the subject filled me with unspeakable horror. These tapestries contained the story of Jason, Medea, and Creusa, and were therefore an example of the most disastrous of marriages. To the left of the throne the bride was seen struggling against the most atrocious death, surrounded by the grief of those present; to the right the father, horror-struck at the sight of the murdered children at his feet; meanwhile the Fury rose up into the sky on her chariot drawn by

dragons. And to ensure that such atrocity and repugnance lacked no touch of absurdity, seen to the right, behind the red velvet backrest of the throne, was the white, coiled tail of that legendary bull, while the fire-breathing monster and Jason in combat were entirely covered by rich drapery … 'What!' I exclaimed, regardless of those present. 'Can anyone so thoughtlessly place before the eyes of a queen, and on her first setting foot in her new land, the example of the most horrible marriage that there has perhaps ever been! Does no one among the architects, the decorators, the upholsterers of France understand that pictures operate on minds and feelings, that they leave impressions, that they stir forebodings! It all seems as if they had wished to send the most ghastly specter to the frontier to welcome this lovely and, as we hear, most joyous lady.' " But Goethe's young friends sought to calm him, to reassure him that nowadays "no one was concerned about searching for meanings in pictures; for them, at least, it would never have entered their minds, and the whole population of the city and region of Strasbourg who would be passing before those tapestries would certainly have no such notions, nor either would the queen herself, or her retinue."[155]

The cruel recklessness that intoxicates France between the Regency and the Estates General carries with it, among other things, a temporary obfuscation when it comes to images. As Madame Geoffrin told someone who was tiring her with a never-ending story: "Success in France requires large knives and brief stories." Large knives held at the ready, brief stories told. And everyone could then move on. But images avenge themselves on those who do not see them. The life of Marie Antoinette is increasingly suffocated by symbols, while those around her notice them less and less.

For the handover, a wooden pavilion—the *pavillon de remise*—had been erected on an island in the middle of the Rhine. Maria Antonietta, as she was called as a child, became Marie Antoinette, now and for evermore. The handover took place on the frontier line, which divided the pavilion and a large table at the center of the main hall. She entered the pavilion on the Austrian side. In the last room before the frontier she was slowly undressed before the attendants who had accompanied her from Vienna. Not even a ribbon or a hairpin could remain in contact with her body. Naked, she was offered clothes made on her new French soil, a silk chemise, stockings from

Lyon, slippers made by the shoemaker to the French court. Her brief, domestic, carefree past had to be forgotten. France was taking her as guest and hostage. The soft contact of the clothes brought to her from Versailles was the embrace of the new god. That pavilion was, for Marie Antoinette, like a *ghotul*, ephemeral, no place for games, the house of cruel initiation, where the transition through ritual death was marked by the many eyes that watched her and would continue watching her up until her clinical death. That gesture of sacrificial undressing entrusted her totally to the land that was clothing her with her fate. Etiquette is the last power to preserve abandoned symbols. Etiquette ensures that symbols, even when they aren't perceived as such, can continue to act, even if a certain sarcasm is added to them. Here a Psyche is innocently entrusting herself to an Eros that is all too tangible in those silks, in that lace. The god to whom she was initiated had a form that was too precise and blasé, he no longer lived in a nurturing and protective cloud, he could no longer retreat into the invisible. It would be easy, one day, to strip him naked in just the same way. When she was imprisoned at the Conciergerie, Marie Antoinette was left with fifteen fine linen chemises trimmed with lace, a satin cloak, two dressing gowns, five bodices, and twenty-two cambric handkerchiefs. Presented as evidence at her trial were locks of hair, skeins of silk, a small mirror, a portrait of a woman, a piece of linen with an embroidery of a red heart pierced by an arrow. For the French, Marie Antoinette would bring the ceremony at Strasbourg to an end as simple Widow Capet, dressed in white piqué, sketched grudgingly by David on the tumbrel that takes her to the scaffold. At the end of the long ceremony in the *pavillon de remise*, once she had crossed the imperceptible frontier at the center of the table, Marie Antoinette hid her head for a moment, sobbing in the arms of the Comtesse de Noailles, her new lady-in-waiting.

A prisoner at the Conciergerie, she asks only to read fiction: she wants "the scariest adventures."

Her own story belongs entirely to the dark century, to that meta-historical realm of revenge and expiation, of blasphemy and omen, which is apparent here even in the gossip. The guardian spirits, blazing at the door of the sepulcher, are Léon Bloy and Louis Massignon. Both are chroniclers of the *mysterium iniquitatis*: one of them the execrator of grocers, provoker of the

Paraclete, the other the grand vizier of Fatima and of the Deuxième Bureau, of Lobachevsky and the Seven Sleepers.

Inside the oval, drawn with a single stroke, a forehead too rounded and childlike, counterbalanced by a protruding, pensive Habsburg lower lip, similar to that of Charles V bent over his clocks.

From the moment she crossed the table at Strasbourg, "l'Autrichienne," as she was immediately called by Mesdames, the three daughters of Louis XV, was confronted by implacable hostility *sine intermissione*. But memory has been clouded by the bloodshed and the passage of time, faces superimpose and merge: ladies insulted at court, ministers, tricoteuses, sansculottes, favorites, royal provisioners—all come together in that hatred. We must return then to the Prince de Ligne, Marie Antoinette's playmate who conspired with her to hide in another niche, behind the bust of Louis XIV that looked out over the groves of Versailles, the same bust that the young Comte d'Artois would sometimes salute: "Bonjour, grand-père." Ligne had second thoughts that evening: he feared they wouldn't give him a ladder to climb down from that awkward position, and that he might be left perched up there all night behind the marble bust.

The only crime that Ligne felt he could lay on Marie Antoinette was one of immense, charming "recklessness." A crime above all of repeated "disregard toward bores of both sexes, who are always implacable."[156] And in order to punish her, a pact was reached among those Implacable beings, who would from then on produce tedium like exemplary English factory women produced pins, with appropriate division of labor among the dining rooms of the Third Estate, the tribunals of the people, and arrogant nobility, forever united by intolerance to any sign of frivolity and indulgence to any aspiration to mediocrity. Stendhal would be aware of this when he was struck by the incredible "vapidity of good company," which had sought, moreover, between 1804 and 1830, to reestablish the salons of 1780.[157] But this time, of course, without the "recklessness."

A wicked thought lingered: might the capacity to generate boredom perhaps allow *bon ton* to be revived? The pact continued to work: nor was there any shortage of blood to bathe it. The trial of Marie Antoinette is the first, victorious insurrection of Bores, the only moment in which the people and the nobility were fused into one single mass.

The Woodcutter and the Fisherman

When Talleyrand, romantic adventurer and faithless bishop, rode through the American forests on horseback, accompanied by his trusty servant Courtiade, he found it hard to pass the time and distract his thoughts from the grim news brought by every ship from France. A call could sometimes be heard among the dense woodland, far from the beaten track: "Courtiade, are you there?" swiftly followed by a far-off, deferential reply: "Oh Lord, yes, Monseigneur, I'm here." Talleyrand smiled at his own incongruity, a feudal remnant, now beyond the frontier of *société*. He gazed about him and had the impression of traveling back down the course of history, of gradually journeying in time and space as he moved slowly away from the cities, the villages, the farms, and the fields, and ended up among the beaver hunters of Connecticut, forded vast swamps and disappeared into the forests. In this sequence, it seemed as though the improbable amalgam of civilization were decomposing before his eyes, returning, little by little, to its simple elements. "At the end of every day," he noted, "we lose sight of some of those inventions which our wants, as they have increased, have rendered necessary; and it seems we are traveling back in the history of the progress of the human mind."[158] But that "progress" held many surprises: having reached the point of utmost simplicity, Talleyrand encountered two model characters: the woodcutter and the fisherman. He described them—and the portrait he drew was not of two figures forsaken by history, but the anticipation of two faces that history was about to adopt: they were the silhouettes of the first *new men*, already anticipating Tocqueville. In their wilderness surroundings, they were about to make their appearance as representatives of the mass. Indeed, they were representatives of those who in an age without irony would be called "mass men." Talleyrand encountered the *odor specificus* of the mass not just in the large city but in desolate, unblemished nature. It was a curious detail, worthy of note. Talleyrand included these two portraits, as instructive clinical cases, in his

Mémoire sur les relations commerciales des États-Unis avec l'Angleterre, which he would read to the Institut de France on April 4, 1797.

The woodcutter. "The American woodcutter does not interest himself in anything; every idea of sensibility is remote from him.[159] Those branches so agreeably disposed by nature; beautiful foliage; the bright color that enlivens one part of the wood; the darker green that gives a melancholy shade to another: these are nothing to him: he retains no recollection of any place: the number of axe-strokes required to fell a tree fills all his thoughts. He never planted; he knows not the pleasures of it. A tree of his own planting would be good for nothing, in his estimation; for it would never, during his life, be large enough to fell: it is by destruction that he lives. He is a destroyer wherever he goes: so every place is equally good in his eyes. He has no attachment to the spot on which he has spent his labor; for his labor is only fatigue, and is unconnected with any idea of pleasure. In the effects of his toil he has not witnessed those gradual increases of growth, so captivating to the planter; he regards not the destination of his products; he knows not the charm of new attempts: and, when quitting the place where he has lived for many years, provided he does not forget his axe, he leaves no regret behind him."

The fisherman. "The vocation of an American fisherman begets a careless soul, almost equal to that of the woodcutter. His affections, his interests, his life are on the side of that society to which it is thought that he belongs. But it would be a prejudice to suppose that he is a very useful member of it. For we must not compare these fishermen to those of Europe, and think that the fisheries here are, like them, a nursery for sailors, for creating strong and sturdy men of the sea. In America, with the exception of the inhabitants of Nantucket, who fish for whales, fishing is an idle employment. Two leagues from the coast, when they have no dread of foul weather, a single mile when the weather is uncertain, is the sum of the courage which they display; and the line is the only instrument with whose use they are practically acquainted. Thus their knowledge is but a trifling trick; and their action, which consists of constantly hanging one arm over the side of the boat, is little short of idleness.

"They are attached to no place; their only connection with land is by means of a wretched house which they inhabit. It is the sea that affords them nourishment: hence a few codfish, more or less, determine their

country. If the number of these seems to diminish in any particular quarter, they emigrate, in search of another country, where they are more abundant.

"When it was remarked, by some political writers, that fishing was a sort of agriculture, the remark was brilliant, but not solid.[160] All the qualities, all the virtues, which are attached to agriculture, are wanting in the man who lives by fishing. Agriculture produces a patriot in the truest acceptation of the word; fishing can alone succeed in forming a cosmopolite."

The person talking in these terms to members of the Institut is not a new La Bruyère writing about barbarism but a sociologist in the age of inflation and paramilitary groups. Around him sound the echoes of Walther Rathenau and Adolf Hitler, hoboes clambering onto freight cars and police on horseback. We don't see majestic tree trunks, but waste paper blowing about Wall Street on a silent Sunday. We remove Talleyrand's Woodcutter from his exotic woodland setting and we find Jünger's Worker: we can already see him in the uniform of a soldier and a factory worker, with no need even for the roar of steel. This man is a focal point for technical violence: his place can be any place, because his mind has lost the mnemotechnical *loci* in which to record images ("he retains no recollection of any place"). His shadow is the parasite, the Fisherman, the man whom society inadvertently includes among its members, but who doesn't belong to society. His passivity is malevolent and hostile, he is one of the migrant *Lumpen*, one of the proletarian jellyfish.

Woodcutter and Fisherman will one day find that they are enemies: for now, in the American wilderness, they are united in their hatred for the land that still generously embraces them. It is a hatred for all that grows and, in growing, mellows and fades. Their rhythm is another: the stroke, the thrust, a metaphor for the gambler who rolls the dice. And their cosmopolite mission is to be found in this devotion to striking: the stroke is the same in every place ("he is a destroyer wherever he goes: so every place is equally good in his eyes"), the tree is the flavor of a single place. The garrulous *citoyens* whom Talleyrand had left in Paris were still good, slow-witted rural patriots, but they now seemed archaic and outmoded in the face of these two new characters beyond the frontier, who were experimenting with history in the making.

Goethe in Venice

April 1790

Gypsy girls like lizards
lost in the tiniest porch way.
Sarcophagi, urns, dankness of gondolas,
verselets brush past him
like the elbow of a child
as she runs. Damp, dirty, idle movement,
troubled hours in the nest of stone and water.
Foreigners cheated any way.
The gazette reports the National Assembly.
O Boredom, mother of the Muses!
One single talent remains:
to write in German language
following a tribe of jugglers.
But the servant unearths among the dunes
a skull at the Jewish cemetery.
And in the decayed muzzle of a ram,
sphenoid, ethmoid, ear socket,
shines the Primal Bone.
From one vertebra
descends the All.

"So ends the best day of our life," wrote the *fédérés* of a French village, closing their account of the celebration of July 14, 1790, the first anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille, day of the General Federation. "France's wedding with France," wrote Michelet, and this was just one of dozens of images he used to describe the occasion.[161] He would not allow himself to break the flow of the story with a single comment: "even the smallest remark could have created an interruption, a discord, perhaps, in that sacred moment."[162] It was an age to which there could be no return,

when the Revolution was “innocence and credulity.”[163] Moments “prior to fulfillment” (as was written on the tortoise shell of the *I Ching*), to the promise of a Final Deed, moments which then—on recollection, as with love sickness—become the Deed itself. Once it is over, “the little fox wets its tail” and the Final Deed becomes oppressive: never push as far as complete happiness, with its persecutory element. Stay with the *promesse de bonheur*.

That day—of double significance, recalling both a bureaucratic innovation (the creation of *départements* put forward by Sieyès) and the storming of a prison (the Bastille, swept by erotic flames and cruel familiar vengeance)—mobilized the primordial images that came before Temples and Priests, images that inhabited Holy Places, Altars of the Soil, the Sacred spread over the countryside, split between sun and shade.

The fact that it really was a return to the beginning is assured by the seal of kitsch that authenticates all the images here: from the anonymous accounts of the provincial *fédérés* up to Michelet, to Jaurès, to the perennial quaver in the democratic voice, brought together in the oath of that day. At noon on July 14, the villages seemed empty, the occasional dog crossed the road. “No temple would have been enough.”[164] No witnesses, everyone taking part. The Altar of the Soil is reconstructed at the center of the Holy Place, between north- and south-facing slopes, lines of young people facing each other, but the record does not suggest the verses of the *Shih Ching*, which respond like the belling of deer. It is the sad lot of Liberty to have to improvise. And if the mind, gliding and sleepwalking in the past, moves once more toward human sacrifice, the euphemism of the Enlightenment will produce this scene: “The newborn child was taken and carried, a living bloom, among the harvest flowers.[165] His mother offered him, placed him on the altar. But he didn’t have just the passive role of an offering, the newborn child was also active, he counted as a person, he swore a civic oath through his mother’s mouth, he claimed his dignity as a man and as a Frenchman, he took possession of the fatherland, he entered hope.”

Provincial France celebrated its rite in open countryside, but Paris had to find the appropriate place inside the city. The vast Champ de Mars was chosen, and an invisible architect shaped it sufficiently to give it the ceremonial hallmarks of the Holy Place: no longer a formless expanse, but a valley excavated by thousands of hands between two hills. “By day, by

night, men of all classes, of all ages, even children, everyone, citizens, soldiers, abbés, monks, actors, Sisters of Charity, smart ladies, fruit sellers, all holding a mattock, pushing a wheelbarrow or a cart.[166] Children went ahead of them, lighting the way; strolling orchestras cheered the workers: they themselves, leveling the ground, sang that leveling song: 'Ah! Ça ira! Ça ira! Ça ira! Celui qui s'élève on l'abaissera' ('Ah! It'll be fine! It'll be fine! It'll be fine! He who thinks himself high shall be brought down')." Excavation work was also the society event of the week: the Duchesse de Luynes had a splendid mahogany wheelbarrow made, with which she moved gravel and soil as her contribution to the enterprise.

On the day of the Celebration, amid squalls of rain and wind, brought by the "Good Lord," who (they said) is "an aristocrat," a hundred and sixty thousand people (or two hundred and fifty thousand? or four hundred thousand?) looked down from the artificial hills of the Champ de Mars at the great central valley, where a large pyramid stood: the Altar to the Fatherland. According to one witness: "This altar was an immense construction, one hundred feet high; it rested on four buttresses that occupied the angles of its vast square and supported tripods of colossal proportion.[167] These buttresses were joined together by flights of steps which were so wide that a whole battalion could climb each one. Rising from the platform to which they led was a pyramid-shaped rampart with a great number of steps, crowned by the Altar of the Fatherland, shaded by a palm tree."

A few weeks before the Fête de la Fédération, a wealthy Prussian nobleman, Jean-Baptiste de Cloots, arrived at the door of the Salle du Manège at the head of a delegation calling itself the "Embassy of the Human Race." In the same way that Rousseau's elusive "general will" would be palpably manifest among the mattocks and wheelbarrows of the Champ de Mars, likewise Humanity, this figure of more or less eighteenth-century invention, was now sending her representatives out to reconnoiter. "Who are you?" they were asked. "We come from Europe, we come from Asia, we come from America. We are Humanity!" Georges Avenel, the inspired nineteenth-century biographer of Cloots, describes this arrival with all the thrill of a race at the Vél' d'Hiv': "The excitement increases; there is general elation.[168] Now it's the turn of the human race! From the nation to the human race there is barely an inch. Yes, for sure, the human race itself is

at the gate. It is waiting. Make way! Everyone feels it, they long for it. It's about to arrive, it's arriving!" At last they appeared at the Assembly, thirty-six of them. There was Pio, a Neapolitan; Don Pablo Olivares, a Spanish victim of the Inquisition; the baron von Trenck, who had been shackled to sixty-eight pounds of chains in a Prussian jail; there were Dutch and English patriots, a Turk, an Arab, and a Chaldean who had just been hired as extras at the opera house; others included an interpreter in Oriental languages at the Collège de France and various out-of-work servants. That evening, urged along by the excitement stirred by the "Embassy of the Human Race," the Assembly voted to abolish hereditary titles, with the consequent Fall of Names. Cloots's embassy, dispatched from the Realm of Operetta to announce the imminent infiltration of its subjects into Europe, gave the final impetus to the decapitation of those noble titles with whose aroma operetta would be spiced.

La Fête de la Fédération had only just finished. Still quivering with excitement, Jean-Baptiste de Cloots wanted to recount it all to the turbulent "Sappho of the Gauls," Fanny de Beauharnais, his friend, writer, and Joséphine's aunt by marriage: "We have won, we have triumphed, and you were not there! Hurry. Madame, hurry. Come, be a witness to the joy of a free nation which, in its happy struggle, takes its place among the Greeks and the Romans. Now we can believe the amazing stories of the father of history and his emulators, those like Thucydides and Titus Livy. I won't describe to you a solemn ceremony that eclipses the memory of all celebrations, ancient and modern. The picture I gazed at for twelve hours cannot be adequately depicted, either with a paintbrush or in words. The place, prepared with our own hands, is breathtaking for its enormity, simplicity, arrangement. Imagine the largest coliseum in the world, crowned by the fine hills of Chaillot, Passy, Meudon, Montmartre; and the dense branches of eight avenues of trees forming a verdant enclosure that surrounds the arena and provides a charming setting for three hundred thousand spectators. The triumphal arch, the bridge over the river, the elegant altar, and the Roman edifice together provided an enchanting scene, with all the flags, all the banners, all the French Empire's weapons of attack and defense. The cannon, the music, and the applause shook heaven and earth.

"In my capacity as ambassador of the human race, I was at the head of the foreigners in the palace galleries, and the ministers of the tyrants looked upon us with a jealous and fearful eye.[169] This national celebration transports us back two thousand years, through its own indescribable patina of antiquity, and it transports us forward two thousand years, through the swift progress of reason, for which this federation is the sweet and early fruit. I will not describe, Madame, all that I experienced yesterday; my heart is delicate and my patriotism ardent: imagine the rest and come as soon as you can."

Talleyrand limped up to the altar of the Champ de Mars to carry out the ceremony. He was then bishop of Autun, and considered by both the old and the new religion as a most godless being. It is not the clumsy king, nor the treacherous queen, but the Priest of the Fête who is the blot that assures the presence of deceit at the center of the paradise improvised by the General Will. And such Will, above all, in its tumultuous vagueness, needed a light finishing touch from Talleyrand himself to stir the feast. To some extent it has to thank him that this day remains the most luminous for those who dream of the quiet and spontaneous embraces of the masses. A month earlier, speaking at the Constituent Assembly, it was Talleyrand who claimed that "that Fête de la Fédération would never have been solemn enough," and then went on to suggest the reasons for its utility: "Strengthening the ties of brotherhood between all citizens, making everyone aware of the Patriotism that stirs the French, it will end up convincing the enemies of the revolution, if any still exist, how vain their efforts would be in destroying it."[170]

Talleyrand had not celebrated many masses as bishop. The day before the Fête, he rehearsed the ceremony at the house of the Marquis de Saisseval, in rue de Lille, together with his friend Mirabeau, who was more familiar with the liturgy. Mirabeau had learned it in prison, to pass the time. They used the mantelpiece as the altar. The other guests sat laughing in their armchairs. Talleyrand's small dog bit his episcopal cassock in fright.

The vast procession set off from the Bastille at seven in the morning. The sky was gray and overcast. Repeated showers of rain. Delays. Crowds pressed everywhere, breaking through the ranks. A floating bridge was built across the Seine. Then everyone, near and far, surrounded the blue-and-gold

tent of the royal tribune. On the steps the king, the dauphin, the queen, dressed in tricolor. Flags everywhere. Lafayette cantering on a white horse. Three hundred robed priests and servers in smocks and tricolor sashes. Talleyrand follows them with his miter, limping along with the aid of his crook. The orchestra plays, twelve hundred instruments. Passing in front of Lafayette, who has just climbed down from his steed, Talleyrand murmurs: "Please, don't make me laugh …"

At the end of this ceremony—a strident idyll that marked the beginning of the age of mass politics—Talleyrand took off his bishop's vestments and immediately went to a gaming hall. He won, won massively—he broke the bank. Then he left. "I had more gold on me than I could put in my pockets, without counting the bills from the Caisse d'Escompte." He went to the house of the Vicomtesse de Laval and, in front of his friends, he turned the piles of gold onto the table. After dinner he went back to play. He won again, won massively. "I went back to the vicomtesse, to show her the gold and the banknotes.[171] I was covered with them; they were even stuffed into my hat. And note well: it was July 14."

The day after the Fête de la Fédération, Talleyrand sent the following comment to his mistress *en titre*, Madame de Flahaut: "If you were as satisfied with your place at yesterday's ridiculous celebration as I was at seeing you and admiring you sitting there, you must have endured the storm with the same philosophy as your friend Sieyès, who, in the presence of sixteen people, asked me, with the sardonic smile that you well know, how I had managed to keep a straight face while performing the *buffoonery* of the Champ de Mars with such skill, and how many Christians I thought there were among those hundred thousand spectators present who swore the National and Christian oath. I told him I had no idea how many. 'According to my calculations,' he went on, 'there may have been five hundred, including the Duc [de Biron], you, me and those of our party.' To tell the truth, dear friend, I fear he was exaggerating the number of believers. And I will say this: despite being a philosopher, I deplore the progressive lack of faith in the people. I share the opinion of Voltaire: whether we ourselves believe in God or not, it would nevertheless be dangerous for any society if the multitude thought that, finding no punishment in this world nor retribution in the next, it can therefore steal, poison, murder. We find ourselves in an age when doctrines against morality are to be feared more

than ever, since the mass of the people believe themselves superior to it. And the most deplorable thing is that the Assembly shows an interest in stirring up among the people this spirit of *political and moral anarchy*. I well know that it is quite unromantic to entertain one's beloved with idle philosophical thoughts. But in who else could I ever confide my innermost thoughts if not in you who are above the biases and prejudices of your sex? … … …

"So far as I am concerned—between ourselves—I couldn't say who I feel more sorry for: the sovereign or the people, France or Europe. If the prince takes for granted the love of the people then he is lost, and if the people, for their part, *don't* guard themselves against the character of the prince, I see it ending in terrible disaster, I see years of bloodshed to cancel out the enthusiasm of a few months. I see the innocent and the guilty embroiled in the same devastation. Whatever happens, either the cause of freedom is under threat, or the peace of France is at risk.

"Far be it for me to suspect Louis XVI of thirsting for blood, but a weak monarch surrounded by bad advisors easily becomes cruel, or, to put it another way, his weakness allows certain cruelties to be practiced under the authority of his name. In whatever way I look at the consequences of yesterday's events, I fear for the future … … …

"Burn this letter."[172]

The unreliability of the historian. Louis Madelin, an eminent Napoleonic historian, considers Talleyrand's remark to Lafayette during the Fête de la Fédération to be unreliable, because it is "improbable." Pasquier, who recorded it in his *Mémoires*, claimed he heard it from Lafayette himself. But Madelin insists: "The man [Talleyrand] was not a sacrilegious loudmouth and, as for Lafayette, a very serious character, he was never able to make anyone laugh."[173]

Between the Fall of Names, indirectly provoked by Cloots's embassy, and the Fête de la Fédération, Michelet is gripped by pathos; several times he is caught up in the eloquence of great moments, he bows before the "prophetic symbol."[174] But the emphasis also serves to delicately protect the gleaming nucleus of the Revolution: "In this system there is no passing on of previous merit, there is no nobility.[175] But neither is there any transmission of earlier guilt." The task of the Revolution is to wipe out

original sin. The abolition of the merits of birth is no more than the exoteric face of a much more radical abolition: that of the guilt of mankind, Adamic guilt, the cancellation of original sin. Evil is now reduced to a conscious action willed by an individual: it is not a legacy that weighs on the fabric of life, that oversteps all limits of will and consciousness, that leaves its mark on everything. Here, all of a sudden, Michelet is a theologian—and from the shadows he summons his rival theologian, Joseph de Maistre, a man who, when he refers to the Revolution, will always refer to the indelibility of original sin.

What is striking above all in the Fête de la Fédération is the nakedness of the symbolism. No one recognizes symbols when they emerge from sleep, from carelessness, and from mockery—and then they seek to be transformed into Fact. The specter that guides the Revolution is that of the *coniunctio*, of the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage. But the first gesture of union immediately ebbs toward unity: "Alas![176] Experience of the world teaches us something strangely sad, though true, that union is often reduced to unity." Thus it happens that "yesterday, the Revolution was a matter of religion; and now it becomes police."[177] Yesterday, in Michelet's dream, it is the Fête de la Fédération; now it is the massacre that would be carried out, exactly a year later, in the same Holy Place.

Lafayette's white horse cantered once again over the Champ de Mars, on Sunday, July 17, 1791. It was just as laughable, but this time the ceremony would find the symbol that was absent the first time, the symbol of all symbols: bloodshed.

According to Michelet, "the fiercest royalists were not perhaps the nobles, nor the priests, but the hairdressers."[178] The slogan of the age —"Return to nature"—had mortally wounded them. "Everything was moving toward a horrifying simplicity."[179] During the night of July 16, an out-of-work hairdresser with lustful intent began wandering the Champ de Mars. He had a tawdry scheme. He wanted to hide himself under the planks of the Altar of the Fatherland to peep under the petticoats of his lost clients, "the haughty women republicans, women tribunes with caps, women orators of the clubs, women in Roman dress, women literati," who would soon "proudly be climbing onto it."[180]

The city was in turmoil. The Assembly, amid opposition, had just decreed "the inviolability" of the king. But a petition from opponents, which proposed no longer to recognize "Louis XVI or any other king," had been carried to the Champ de Mars. The people were to sign it that Sunday, on the Altar of the Fatherland. The hairdresser had chosen an old disabled soldier as his accomplice. They took with them something to eat and a cask of water. Hidden in the darkness, they began to bore holes into the planks with a gimlet. But early in the morning, a woman vendor who was already there, waiting at the Altar of the Fatherland, heard a strange noise beneath her feet. The two scoundrels were busy making holes. They had been found out. A crowd soon gathered around them. The formidable washerwomen of Gros-Caillou rushed to the scene. It was rumored the two men had been caught with a barrel of gunpowder, that they wanted to "blow up the people." Shortly after, their throats were slit. Around nine in the morning, the two heads were carried in procession to the Palais-Royal. It marked the beginning of a sequence of orders, counterorders, ploys, rumors, misunderstandings, altercations. Meanwhile the crowd gathered on the Champ de Mars. Many people were signing the petition with their names or with crosses. There was an air of celebration. Toward noon, some people started to organize dancing. One witness saw the Altar of the Fatherland as a "lively mountain, formed by so many human beings on top of each other."[181] Then Lafayette arrived with his men. Someone fired at him and was immediately arrested. Lafayette, magnanimous and vain, ordered him to be released. Later other guards arrived, together with cavalry, artillery, and along with Jean-Sylvain Bailly, the astronomer and mayor of Paris, who looked pale and overwhelmed by the events. A group of hairdressers also arrived carrying arms: they wanted to avenge their colleague. There were shots, clouds of dust, screams. The dead lay strewn over the planks of the Altar of the Fatherland. The number is not known: many were thrown into the Seine. From that time, the history books talk about the "Champ de Mars Massacre."

On the same hot afternoon, Gouverneur Morris, ever curious, attempted to climb up toward Passy to see the fighting on the Champ de Mars from above. But he didn't get there in time. Morris had arrived in Paris from Philadelphia at the beginning of the Estates General. In the United States he had put the finishing touches to the Constitution with a solid sense of the

facts and for what was possible. He had lost a leg in an accident. His faltering French was that of a distant province, inadequate for the aphoristic flashes of conversation. But his American credentials were still good enough in Paris to stir well-meaning curiosity. In short, he was a trusted guest in many illustrious houses. He assiduously courted Madame de Flahaut, and with some success. At that time she had an apartment at the Louvre and was already Talleyrand's mistress. Gouverneur referred to Talleyrand as "the bishop." Once he had got to know him, he found him "sly, cunning, ambitious and malicious."[182]

Back down from Passy, Morris spent that Sunday evening of July 17 with Madame de Ségur. Returning home, he spent a contemplative moment—rare for him—looking at the Seine: "I think one of the finest views I ever saw was that which presented itself this evening from the Pont Royal.[183] A fine moonshine, a dead silence, and the river descending gently through the various bridges between lofty houses, all illuminated (for the sake of the police), and on the other side the woods and distant hills. Not a breath of air stirring. The weather has this day been very hot."

On Taste

"Reasoning is sadly gaining currency"
—Voltaire to Madame du Deffand

Taste makes its appearance in order to inherit. To inherit what? Difficult to say. But certainly in every civilization dreamed of by reactionaries, taste did not exist. *Meaning* was enough to suppress it. And meaning has to quake on its foundations before taste makes an appearance.

Perhaps some great anthropologist, some Marcel Mauss in a remote wilderness, will one day discover what *taste* has been—as something that can be studied from the sum of various documents. For there is certainly something improbable about its appearance (and disappearance) in the history of societies. It is an efflorescence that promises no return. It lasts a

short time, is easily swallowed up, but the effects of its appearance are irreversible. Its memory will not be erased.

When "correspondences"—the last canon—collapsed, the function of law was preserved for several years by a silent pact of manners, gestures, physiology, which despite its obvious fragility nevertheless feigned to be as equally solid, everlasting, and overtly fair as every barbarous predecessor.

Eighteenth-century France, in cultivating taste, confines and diminishes the meaning of literature. There is something ludicrously petty about their tragedies, which they find gratifying. But Napoleon will ask in vain for a *new* form of tragedy. Pettiness also in poetry, insipid anacreontics. Judgments on Shakespeare: Voltaire sends *Julius Caesar* to Cardinal de Bernis so that he can *laugh at it*. It is thought scandalous that the Regent admires Rabelais. Fontenelle finds Virgil's sixth Eclogue "bizarre." Madame du Deffand reads Saint-Simon with immense pleasure, but she guards herself by adding: he has an "abominable style," he is not an "homme d'esprit."[184]

What then is taste, if it actually impedes a certain understanding of literature? But isn't that certain understanding of literature perhaps, in turn, a subtle and late-formed Western essence, distilled from history, an essence that had not yet been formally analyzed, and would only be analyzed much later, during the time of Baudelaire and Mallarmé? Taste, on the other hand, crystallizes earlier, and its origin lies far away from the arts. Painting or literature or furniture: they are just some of the many areas of its application. But the source of taste is another: taste is now the mark of initiation, it is applied to everything, and to nothing in particular. It is a seal of existence, the final substitution of a wisdom that it is good taste not even to mention.

Sainte-Beuve, in referring to Antoine Hamilton, fixed the discovery of "netteté," clarity, between "the end of La Bruyère or Fénelon and the beginning of Jean-Jacques," a few decades in which something irreversible is crystallized, a form, a hint of Western sobriety that will soon be corrupted, yet retaining its indelible character, in the background of everything.[185] Anyone who is quick to complain how the language of "netteté" has opened the way to the most pretentious insipidness, which still rages, must however remember that the French language "became the

language of the perfect *honnête homme* with Pascal."[186] Shortly before being condensed, and almost strangled, in the short phrases promoted by Voltaire, the *honnête homme* had strolled around the empty space between two chairs—and something reminded him still of a meandering flicker, the reflection of clear water only slightly muddied.

Shame, the gesture of referring to that which is not to be named, that which is called taste in the final stage of its life, is what has preserved, beyond its death, the language ordered on the axis of the world. And so it is the greatest act of blasphemy when the axis of the world has become the stratification of society. Everything responds in it, but like mirror with mirror. What once held opposites without coming into sight becomes the only thing that can be sighted. The opposites are momentarily illuminated to give more solidity to the uniform foundation from which they rise. The disappearance of linear culture leaves the word and the other sacrificial objects—sound and image—suspended in air, with no right and no restriction, whereas the new tribe perpetually sacrifices to itself the empty and magnificent spoils of the vanished tribe. Final liberation takes place in a state of total blindness. If nothing can be fixed to an axis, words become constellations of the thing itself. They are the slenderest fibers, easy to crush, but they are the only things to be born without being assisted at any time by the urge of arbitrary will. Such fragility restores the difference that has been canceled out. Now, only that which can be canceled out is to be trusted.

A visitor at the Salon of 1828 happened to come across Talleyrand: "Approaching, or rather dragging himself along between two valets who were dressed in black, we saw a kind of motionless figure who slid with the same step in front of daubs and masterpieces; in front of paintings from Couder to Picot's Tsarina.[187] I mistook him for a character by Curtius, in which the wax has come out rather too yellow, or for an automaton that was crossing the Louvre to take up its place at the exposition of French industry." During those final years, Talleyrand's personal appearance seemed to be suggesting that the whole of history, guided by him, was about to enter the Grévin Wax Museum. The bourgeois age was sick of history—

and this sometimes gave it a conceited glee. But it dared not recognize that that sickness was the consequence of an impalpable fact: the cutting of the family knot that tied the present to past history. In Saint-Simon the generations of peers and bastards are entangled in that knot, the dead are still living at Versailles a few apartments away. But with Michelet everything is hallucination—and the present is just an annoyingly faithful hallucination. History as *family history* is swallowed up forever. Gripped by the bombast of the emancipated, the bourgeoisie under Louis Philippe had "always prided themselves on understanding the whole of history," as Sainte-Beuve sarcastically observed.[188] But they were ready only to set it out in the illustrations of the *Magasin pittoresque*. The automaton and the waxwork are the new Watchmen at the Gate. Now they must both receive an offering in order to gain access to the future and to the past.

Throughout his life, from his first appearances in public, Talleyrand was the butt of accusations and insults of every kind. Everyone took pleasure in attacking him, from anonymous gazetteers to rulers, to the new emperor and democratic shopkeepers. The motives, varying each time, were corruption, betrayal, treachery, lying, criminal conduct. At the height of the age of Good Feelings, he had the privilege of being the shining image of Evil. After his death, the historians joined in, right until today. His criminal file is a hefty one: allegations mount, they sometimes corroborate each other. At the age of seventy-three, Talleyrand was publicly struck in the face and kicked by his attacker. When Charles X asked him to explain what had happened, he replied: "Sire, it was a punch." In the life of a politician, insults don't matter, but humiliations do. For Talleyrand, through all the reversals of fortune and allegiance, there are few actual moments of embarrassment and even fewer moments of humiliation. The worst of these were not the famous scenes in front of Napoleon, with his threats and insults, but two encounters with the king whom Talleyrand had most certainly reinstalled on the throne—Louis XVIII, King Ubu, the old gamekeeper who used to go around shooting at poachers. And, in his eyes, Talleyrand would always remain a poacher, even though his return to France was thanks to him. As Chateaubriand observed, Louis XVIII, "while not being cruel, was not human."[189] At their meeting at Mons, in the middle of the night, Talleyrand runs limping after the carriage of the king he hadn't wanted to pay his respects to during the day. "I'm in no hurry," he had said,

in accordance with his principle that "few political dealings are of such a nature that they cannot be delayed."[190] And yet that night he was woken with a start, had to forgo his long toilette, ran down into the street, supported on the arm of Monsieur de Ricé, only to hear the king's brief words of derision: "Prince of Benevento, are you leaving us? The waters will do you good: do let us have your news."[191] The other encounter was during the second Restoration, when Talleyrand was head of government and asked his king to pledge him greater trust. Vitrolles recounts: "Monsieur de Talleyrand, generally so skilled at soft insinuation, had no doubt reckoned that he needed to use a more peremptory language this time; the king, who was not accustomed to such tones, was shocked and, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, paused in silence for a moment.[192] 'Well,' he eventually answered with a quiet air, 'I shall choose a new government.' " Writing to the Duchess of Courland the following day, Talleyrand would acknowledge the insult he had borne, so far as his style permitted: "His ingratitude is insufficiently concealed."[193] None of the many new men with whom Talleyrand had dealings, starting with Napoleon, would have been capable of wounding him so coldly: it required that fat, insensitive man whose only real concern was for his own peace of mind; it required a Bourbon to knock down the Prince, almost without realizing it, an act of revenge that came from deep down in his blood.

As literature sets off on its tortuous route to becoming absolute, it joins up with Satanism in a shared passion, in what only the greatest theologians have come to recognize as one of the gravest sins: curiosity. The image of the writer then becomes Milton's Satan when, "having reached the earthly paradise, he flew straight down onto the tree of life, the tallest tree in the garden, and rested there, looking like a cormorant, without any attempt to re-conquer life, indeed using the tree only to enable him to see farther, *for prospect*."[194] This could be the motto for the experimental frenzy that has been throwing forms into continual disarray since the times of Sainte-Beuve: *For prospect*. And wasn't it, after all, in that same empty curiosity that the theologians had found the radical sin of the new science?

"The disease of literature and of *art*, as they call it, is very common these days … Never perhaps in any age, I would suggest, have phrase and color, the falsehood of the literary word, predominated to such an extent over the

foundation and over the truth as in these years.[195] The realm of the pen has replaced, literally, the realm of the sword." Marx would relentlessly follow the emancipation of the exchange value in its every tiny detail; likewise Sainte-Beuve looked long at the emancipation of the word. It was a process in which he felt himself an accomplice, but at the same time it revolted him. The sinuous verbosity of the new writers, who sailed in the editorial waters of the press and unwittingly discovered the industrial use of the word, their elation at realizing that the word was capable of everything and managed to cover everything, seemed, in his view, to secretly descend from the same origins as Chateaubriand's majestic prose. And they were also the origins of Hugo, who continued to produce page after page with his "rough soul of the strong and cunning Barbarian."[196] But the ultimate rancor lay elsewhere: from that same odious proliferation came the *newness* that Sainte-Beuve, in the fearful corner of his mind, was not inclined to follow, even if his farsightedness prevented him from ignoring it: the newness of Baudelaire, then of Flaubert, both entranced by absolute literature. The basest word and the perfect word were soon to mix together in their waters, like in certain gnostic rituals. Sainte-Beuve, who always refused to stray beyond good and evil, was now distressed to realize that around him there was no "foundation" or "truth" on which to rely. And he spoke to himself in his confidential tone, that of the tender cynic: "I was a petty thief in my youth, I'll be a pirate in old age.[197] Oh, how I would have preferred to be a good literary gentleman, who lives on his lands in a state of poetry!"

Metamorphoses of Style

Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac once boasted that he had "found something many were looking for, namely a certain little art of arranging words and putting them in the right place." Apart from that "little art," there is nothing else than "the secret force by which the words are elicited from Heaven, from which, along with it, comes greatness and majesty."[198]

This is how Sainte-Beuve introduces Guez de Balzac: “No one represents more ingenuously than he the *man of letters* seen as a type, in his primitive solemnity, in his state of pure preservation and of provincial gentlemanliness, in his absolute respect for all that is the costume and pomp of language, in his perfect ineptitude in everything else.”[199]

“… like Guez de Balzac, who, when the Abbé de Saint-Cyran spoke to him about salvation and grace, could only say: ‘*How wonderful!*’ To which Saint-Cyran, in exasperation, one day replied: ‘You give me the impression, Monsieur de Balzac, of a man who, on seeing a mark on his face in the mirror, finds nothing else to say except that the mirror is good and fine.’[200] And Balzac then, struck by the fairness of the comparison and the appropriateness of the imagery, couldn’t resist exclaiming: ‘Oh, how very finely put!’ At which point, Saint-Cyran despaired of him and of all those minds who are all for expression and imagery.”

Guez de Balzac, fancy cocotte of the written word, enjoyed admiring the austerity of Port-Royal from a distance. And Saint-Cyran, the most severe and ferocious of the pères, made him shiver with delight when he showed him contempt and scorn. It once took Balzac three months to compose and hone a letter to Saint-Cyran. From the outset he wove hyperbole and metaphor into it, but along with solid vanity he also displayed the worry of a timid lover: “I know you will not like this language and will frown at this letter of mine.” But he immediately flew off again: “You have to admit, monsieur, that you’re the greatest tyrant in the world today; that your authority will raise fear in every soul and, when you speak, there is no way that people can hold their own opinion if it does not correspond to yours … But one certainly finds pleasure at letting oneself be forced to happiness and falling into the hands of a man who exercises no violence other than one that profits those who suffer it.”

Saint-Cyran propped that long letter on the mantelpiece, unopened. When he himself wrote to Monsieur d’Andilly, he mentioned a “letter from Monsieur de Balzac that I intend to read in three days’ time.” One month later, greatly agitated at having had no reply, Balzac begged a friend to approach Saint-Cyran to ask whether he had ever received the letter. Saint-Cyran replied that he had certainly received it, indeed he apologized for the delay and would put matters right immediately: in front of Balzac’s friend, he wrote a short answer that was much admired.

"The famous writer therefore spent thirty uninterrupted years on his estate, entirely absorbed in the contemplation of himself and his literary work, which had been precocious and brilliant, yet had never matured.[201] His enemies called him *Narcissus*; indeed he spent all day gazing at himself in the Charente canal, or in that *Mirror* of rhetoric that seemed so beautiful to him. He never renewed his spirit in the world and through contact with men. He ended up swelling in emptiness. Solitude ruined his spirit, just as the world ruins it for others."

"Three days before his death, he was still putting the finishing touches to his manuscripts; he had fair copies made for the printers, since he was more concerned about every detail and every minor *cul de lampe* than about anything else.[202] He died in this way on February 18, 1654, thinking chaotically about his flowery games and his conscience, sincere no doubt, having converted out of compunction, but having converted while holding firm to his defect and his weakness which always reemerged."

"Nature, history, geography, the universe, existed only to provide him with his single and favorite plunder: metaphor. Let us examine ourselves, let us peer into our own literary conscience. I suspect that more than one eminent modern writer is not as distant to Guez de Balzac as he imagines." Examining himself closely, Sainte-Beuve suspected he himself belonged to "that sort of spirit that is all for expression and imagery."[203]

Like a malevolent genealogist who introduces venom into the family history, Sainte-Beuve identified Guez de Balzac as the forefather of style-obsessed writers of French prose. That cult, of such fatuous and ridiculous origin, whose beginnings will always remain uncertain, despite all conjecture, was destined to have a long and eventful life. It no longer gazed at itself in the waters of the Charente, but sailed in all parts, as far as the old Ocean, until it was lost from sight on Rimbaud's *Bateau ivre*. In the sentences of Rousseau, leaving aside "his thought and his basic genius," Sainte-Beuve's ear recognized "the movement, cadence, caesuras, articulations, and in a way the framework" of Guez de Balzac's prose.[204] But other undertakings remained: with Chateaubriand, style becomes a magnificent plunder and he subjugates everything to his empire. His "spirit of conquest" did not belong just to politics. "Chateaubriand is a great writer,

a great conqueror and invader in matters of style.[205] (This is basically his only unity of passion and feeling, the unity of the stylist); he is neither realist, nor Christian, nor republican, nor socialist, nor … etc., but all this at the same time or in succession, according to what imagery, what more or less beautiful and tempting metaphors there are to be reaped in all fields of ideas: he cannot hold back and throws himself on them: he is a full-blown plunderer, a hoarder of bright and flowery tithes: royal lilies, red carnations, even violets hidden in the grass or knapweed in the cornfields of Beauce, he wanders the countryside searching out everything that seems lovely to pick and, where he has never sown, he gathers his plunder, the variegated flora of all harvests."

Proust spoke of style as the "sign of the transformation that the writer's thought imposes on reality."[206] Once the professorial distinction between "form" and "content" so admired by Sainte-Beuve has been abolished, thought displays itself in what had long passed for mere ornament. After Chateaubriand's sonorous plundering, in Flaubert the scattered and splintered materials are brought together: "All parts of reality are converted into one and the same substance, with vast surfaces, in glittering monotone.[207] No impurity is left. The surfaces have become reflective. All things are depicted there, but in reflection, without altering the uniformity of substance. Everything that was different has been converted and absorbed."

"Style," observed Daumal, "is the mark of what one is on what one does."[208]

Proust falls upon Sainte-Beuve with a flaming sword: it is the absolute literature of Baudelaire, of Flaubert, of Proust himself that reaps its vengeance on the man who had preferred to kowtow to some representative of the Noailles family or some other ministerial power rather than devoting a further word to Baudelaire. As an avenging angel, Proust has no doubts, but justice suddenly blinds him. Just as Sainte-Beuve had looked with sour suspicion on any claim by literature to be absolute, almost as though it were breaking the rules of the game, so Proust ended up accusing Sainte-Beuve of a conception that, by tortuous ways, brought him close to that of the *Recherche.* "At no moment in his life does Sainte-Beuve seem to have conceived literature in a truly profound way.[209] He places it on the same level as conversation." And indeed "his books … have the atmosphere of a

series of rooms where the author has invited various interlocutors who are questioned about the people they have known, who bring their own accounts aimed at either contradicting others and, with it, to show how there is also much to criticize in the man one tends to praise, or otherwise at putting anyone who contradicts into another category of spirits."[210] Here, at the very point where he seeks to demolish Sainte-Beuve's "method," Proust was revealing its secret, which was much akin to his own. Sainte-Beuve's *Causeries*, accumulated Monday after Monday, but also his *Chateaubriand* and even his austere *Port-Royal*, if seen from a distance and in their sequence, turn out, thanks above all to the use of conversation, to be an immense hallucinatory serial novel, packed with voices, allusions, fragments of recollections, gossip, fleeting images, recurring sounds and echoes. And everything flows into one single, slow, relentless current that becomes lost in Sainte-Beuve himself, in his way of living, always fearful, as the last delicate soul. His "method," which "consists of not separating the man and the work," certainly didn't claim to have any theoretical substance.[211] But it was an excellent pretext for enabling him with impunity —while keeping up appearances, sometimes exaggeratedly—to describe hundreds of lives, rooms, landscapes, encounters, elegiac pleasures, flashes of mischief that Sainte-Beuve continued silently dreaming about in his studio. That insidious kind of literary criticism "is almost incompatible with Christian practice," Sainte-Beuve admitted to himself in his *Cahiers*, which were for him "the bottom drawer of the desk, a piece of furniture for inner rooms, not to be put on show."[212] But not so much because it obliged him constantly, against the biblical precept, to "judge, always to judge others!" (Here the slight hypocrisy that he often practiced even followed him to his secret rooms.[213]) It was, instead, a constant temptation, an irresistible temptation, to "reproduce the other, to transform myself into him, as I often do: a basically pagan operation, an Ovidian metamorphosis."[214] But at least once we come across a frank admission: "There are certain people who take my articles on authors as literary criticism and are upset that these absorb me so much; they do not realize that the criticism in such articles is a very secondary aspect, that I regard them as a portrait, a depiction, the expression of a sentiment; they do not realize that, compelled as I am to write for *journals*, I have found, and in a certain way invented, the manner for pursuing there, under a somewhat disguised form, the novel and the

elegy.[215] But three-quarters of readers, all those of a vulgar mind, don't even notice it."

There is a test for all of this. A person is not likely to be a good reader of the *Iliad* if he doesn't enjoy lingering over the catalogue of ships: likewise, in approaching Sainte-Beuve, try opening the "table générale et analytique," which, in more than four hundred pages, provides the list of names referred to in the fifteen volumes of the *Causeries*. There we find unknown and classical figures, kings and men of letters, women of influence, politicians, socialites, and monks. It is an immense tapestry of voices, opinions, events, relationships, of words lost and recaptured here. Squandering his talent—as Proust put it—week by week, on books that happened to end up on his desk, Sainte-Beuve had spent years, with sticks and moss, building that grand, unwieldy, obsessive construction that resembled a novel, but which he would never have dared present as such. The "table générale et analytique" of the *Causeries* stands—not just for its size but also for its deep affinity of concept—alongside three other indexes of names: those of Saint-Simon's *Mémoires*, Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, and Proust's *Recherche*.

Long before the time of Goethe or Napoleon (who for many reasons are immediately fit for the *Reader's Digest*, and it was hardly by chance that they met to exchange unforgettable trivia), the Anthropos of new times, the universal man, who rested his feet in the realm of the heavens and put the planetary variants together in his mind, seeking for the first time not to forget a single one of them, was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. For him, infinitesimal calculus was a prelude to the expansion of the realm of the enlightened and despotic Tsar Peter from Kamchatka to America, the provincial dissent of the churches converged in a *prima materia* of revelation, and the Jesuits in China had only to persuade Emperor K'ang-hsi to make diligent use of optical instruments so that Confucian wisdom could divest itself of its overly Asiatic dregs. This all-encompassing man was buried in Hannover "like a highwayman," as his friend Ker of Kersland recorded.[216] The only mourner to follow the coffin of that first cosmic secretary and secret counselor of the divinity was his unremarkable private secretary Eckhart.

The physiocratic François Quesnay, an abrupt man with a certain "monkey-like manner," was Madame de Pompadour's physician.[217] He lived in a cramped mezzanine over the apartments of the king's favorite, where the politics of France was discussed each day. Often he invited Diderot, d'Alembert, Duclos, Helvétius, Turgot, and Buffon to dine with him. Madame de Pompadour, who could not receive the same guests for reasons of etiquette and decency, would sometimes go up to her physician's rooms to greet them, and remained there in conversation.

Louis XV ennobled Quesnay in Madame de Pompadour's apartment. He took three pansies from a vase manufactured by Sèvres (founded with the support of Madame de Pompadour since, until then, France had no expertise in the new art of porcelain production and had been importing 500,000 livres' worth each year from Saxony and Japan) and said: "Here, Quesnay, I ennoble you and give you a coat of arms that speaks." It marked the birth of political economy.

One of the events of world importance in the years shortly before the Revolution was the final sanctioning of the alliance between snobbery and the left. At the time there was no talk of either snobbery or the left, but suddenly the most influential and often the most elegant ladies began discussing custom duties and Virginia tobacco, spinning mills and credit, and made even some stabbing reference to net output. General interest (alas, though interest nonetheless) became the center of conversation, obscuring that unfettered dissipation of *esprit*, as had happened up to then. From that moment, high snobbery, which always needs some discreet way of concealing itself, knew what cloak to hide beneath: the Good Cause, whether social, musical, humanitarian, avant-garde, erotic, or Asiatic. But the star of the Righteous shone from the brows of ladies as they welcomed guests to their dinners, to their parties, to their leisurely picnics.

The idea of equality comes from initiation: only through a highly artificial process—as initiation is—can "equality," a condition nonexistent in nature, be achieved. After 1789, from the moment when Masonic emblems become a basis and assumption of civic life, their nature as emblems or their initiatory origins is no longer recognized, the world of inversion has established its ground. There is a double movement: all are initiates, but initiation itself disappears once and for all as a point of

reference. It remains only in the perpetual shadow of the conspiracy and will reemerge from the libraries, with the great academic ethnographers.

Already at the beginning of the Revolution, and then during each of its canonical phases—apart from the Terror, not surprisingly, since from then on, history will have to choose one of two ways: either Talleyrand or the Terror—each of the events that occurs needs an ultimate protection, a malevolent guardian who holds its hand and helps it to write new pacts: Talleyrand. On each occasion he helps the chaos to assume an acceptable form. When an act has an excessive and almost paralyzing symbolic power, we discover that pale hand of his in the shadows, supporting the hand of others, of many others, of a succession of friends or enemies. He is the person responsible for the final version of Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man: "The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to contribute personally, or through their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, are equally admissible to all public dignities, positions, and employments, according to their capacity …"

A Belated Nostalgia for Sorrow

Talleyrand and Madame de Staël had been lovers at the time when she was explaining to Monsieur de Surgères, between one *contredanse* and another, the meaning of "Western dominion."[218] Talleyrand couldn't forget the ungainliness of her body, but had written to her from America asking for help, and she had offered enough assistance to allow him to return. She would then make six visits to Paul Barras on Talleyrand's behalf. On one occasion she bursts into the Luxembourg Palace, disheveled and distraught, and tells Barras that Talleyrand is about to throw himself into the Seine unless he is made minister of foreign affairs. He has just ten golden louis. If politics, in its metaphysical sense, demands a knowledge of how "to make

women march," as Talleyrand so brazenly put it, Madame de Staël marched with proud passion, and generally reached her destination.

They respected each other for their supreme powers of conversation: but Talleyrand developed a coldness and impatience toward her. In 1812, he told Madame de Kielmannsegge: "If Madame de Staël finds me a cruel being, one thing at least is certain: intellectually, she makes me cringe."[219] The Marquise de Beaulaincourt told Edmond de Goncourt she had dined twice in her life with Talleyrand, and on both occasions she had heard him tell the same story about how the Neckers had had to order a "tourne-cuisses" for their daughter to correct her legs and feet.[220] For a long time Madame de Staël tried not to forgive Talleyrand's infidelities, neglect, and unkindness, but to no avail. In her novels she felt compelled to introduce a character based on him: in *Delphine* she transformed him into a woman, Madame de Vernon, in whom we recognize a shrewd description of Talleyrand's coldness: "No one knows better than I how to exploit indolence: I use it to undo, with perfect naturalness, the activity of others … I have never taken the trouble of wanting something, except for three or four times in my life; but whenever I decide to make such an effort, nothing can detract me from my purpose, and I do achieve it, you can be sure."[221] Once, in a letter of 1809 from Geneva, Madame de Staël was able to use the only words to Talleyrand that could pierce his invisible armor: "Good-bye.[222] Are you happy? With such a superior spirit, don't you occasionally arrive at the bottom of everything, I mean at sorrow?"

But Talleyrand had already indirectly replied to Madame de Staël, whom he so ridiculed. The words in that letter penetrate to such a degree that his zealous band of critics couldn't even notice. What were infidelity, corruption, venality, cruelty in the face of that damning accusation that he was ignorant of sorrow? One day in 1808, with Madame de Rémusat—another friend, another excellent conversationalist, but not as imperious and pushy as Madame de Staël—Talleyrand had hinted at an answer. Perhaps it was due to her ability to "stir his soul, so often slumbering by custom, by character, and by indifference," that he told her: "Il eût peut-être mieux valu souffrir …" ("It would perhaps have been better to have suffered …").[223, 224] In Talleyrand's system, this phrase—perhaps the only sublime phrase among his many *bons mots*—was similar to that of Flaubert's: "Ils sont dans le vrai …" ("They are in the right …"). Both men were gripped by a

jealous and despotic vocation: writing, for Flaubert, meant that life had to be killed; living *les grandes affaires*, for Talleyrand, meant that it was sorrow that had to be killed. The craftsman's mask was pasted to their faces —and it couldn't leave them for even a moment without them becoming deformed, sincere. They continued on to the last, unflinchingly. The files crammed with quotes for *Bouvard et Pécuchet* were, for one of them, what the negotiations in 1831 on the Belgium question were for the other. And above all, the long, flawless death, interspersed with various moments of pardon from the Church, mother of sorrows. With a whorl of funereal rococo, Franz Blei commented: "Over this belated nostalgia for sorrow is drawn the mask and the legend that call themselves Talleyrand."[225]

The Languor of a Park in Berry

The Prince is now in his eighties. He has brought peace once more to Europe by settling the Belgian problem. He is lord of the chateau of Valençay, living under the protection of his beloved niece Dorothée, the Duchess of Dino. He notes down ordinary, liquid words, surfacing behind monotony, the final curtain: "I organize my life so that it is monotonous, I want to close myself up behind domestic concerns.[226] I am not happy, I am not unhappy; my health is not good, but it is not bad; I have no pains nor illnesses; I am fading gently and, if this state of languor doesn't cease, I don't know how it might end. But this neither grieves me nor does it frighten me. My business is done. I have planted some trees, built a house, done various other foolish things; isn't it time to end it?" Yet sometimes, almost unwittingly, he lets slip certain disarming phrases that offer glimpses of his past and his inner thoughts: "Nothing makes me suffer, because I am prepared for everything"; "I do not struggle against destiny."[227, 228]

The Duke of Orléans, son of Louis Philippe, while staying at Valençay, had occasion to see the plaster casts of the legs of Talleyrand's women friends. On each was carved the model's name. Thus, over many decades,

the Prince had had woven for them soft stockings. By now they were nearly all dead.

History's curs threw themselves at Talleyrand, snarling because, it was said, he would never believe in anything, not even in history itself, the *ultima dea.* Yet the aristocratic Talleyrand once told the creature he most loved, the aristocratic Madame de Dino: "There is nothing less aristocratic than incredulity."[229]

Talleyrand saw that the difference between the age in which he had been born—an age that was cyclical, ceremonial, though no longer ritualistic—and the experimental age that surrounded him at eighty (and still expected him at least to sort out the Belgian question) lay not just in what was being produced but in what was coming to an end. The Princesse de Vaudémont died on New Year's Eve 1833. She spent her last years surrounded by animals. She was generous to the poor. Talleyrand had first met her fifty years earlier, with his mistress and patron Comtesse de Brionne. Since then they regarded each other as friends. It was at her house that Talleyrand had made his peace with Fouché and had listened with mild indulgence to the intrigues of Aimée de Coigny. Those teas were held in the "most dangerous place for an unstable government.[230] There, it was safe to plot. The armchairs were so comfortable, the life so pleasant and so inconsequential, that spies used to doze off." Napoleon, in the meantime, had fallen from power and died; and so, too, once again, had the Bourbons. Casimir, Comte de Montrond—libertine, gambler, crook, ready for any kind of shady enterprise, the man in whom many saw the dark soul of Talleyrand, since they wanted to attribute a dark soul even to the Devil—saw the Prince weep only once, when news of his old friend the Princesse de Vaudémont's death reached him in London. Talleyrand noted: "It is a feature of these times that certain things in what we call society are coming to a complete end.[231] At one time a famous salon, or a person who was influential in spirit or judgment, was replaced by another. All that we can clearly see today is what is lost. All that will be reborn is still hidden.—And so, despite all the mischief of the young, I find this to be the golden age of the old; and it proves that society itself is coming to an end." The old man would no longer be the intermediary for experiment, since that experiment ended each time with him. But in this way he became something all the more

mysterious and impressive; a stone left abandoned in a field, carved by an unknown hand, in accordance with unknown rules. The physiognomies of these survivors, deprived of all progeny, stand out in solitude: their uselessness is magnificent, the wisdom that perhaps they do not have and they certainly do not wish to transmit looks at us in silence like every memory that accepts self-destruction.

"In the four corners of the room were small triangular Chinese lacquer shelves, on which stood four plaster busts, dressed with black crêpe both to protect them from dust and as a mark of mourning, for these were busts of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Madame Elisabeth, and the Dauphin."[232] That most terrible of acids, a stale virginity, corrodes the line of the profiles, observed the Catholic roué Barbey d'Aurevilly. The provincial nobility wanders around between mourning and dust, in vast rooms with smoke-stained walls that separate them from the heavy darkness of Normandy. But the Restoration also recalls, evokes, a power that will forever be denied to the revolutionaries who remain always the same: "The Jacobins of France were just as dour, solemn, and pedantic as the Puritans of England."[233] A Chouan knight, Jacques Des Touches, their ruthless enemy in the Normandy areas of Valognes and Coutances, brought something different to mind: he was dubbed "la Belle Hélène" for his youthful looks, and "the Wasp" for his venomous raids, since he knew how to vanish into thin air and even into the mist and waves of the English Channel with his primitive dugout canoes. There is something erotic about feudal homage, about feudal loyalty, that shuns any democratic devotion: from Chevalier Des Touches to Clark Gable, all of them "gone with the wind." Guerrilla warfare is an abstract game where, in the end, people even forget for whom they are fighting. The difference is in the eye that stares at a naked body: Aimée de Spens undresses at the window, doubly spied upon: by the Blues of the revolutionary army, who think she is alone, though she is sheltering Des Touches, the Chouan, who is staring at her from within. Years after, the feudal eros still causes Aimée to blush: and when Barbey d'Aurevilly, an indiscreet chronicler, went to visit Des Touches at the hospice at Caen, he found him sitting on a stone, "and those eyes of his, which had scanned the farthest parts of the sea, the mist, the lines of enemies and the smoke of

battle, gazed passively, apathetically at the beds of red flowers he had once compared to Aimée and which perhaps, in the abstraction of his dementia, he didn't even notice."[234]

In the early days of the Revolution, a cook called Francesco Desnot was often to be seen in the vicinity of any bloodshed. When Marquis de Launey, governor of the Bastille, was repeatedly bayoneted, a voice came from the crowd: "The Nation demands his head to display it to the public." And the task was given to Desnot, who had just been kicked in the testicles by the governor as he struggled: "Since you have been injured, you can cut off his head."[235] But Desnot refused the saber that was offered to him: he wanted to cut through Launey's neck with a small black-handled knife he had in his pocket and used for preparing meat in the kitchen. Eight days later, a similar scene occurred. Berthier's body was stabbed by many bayonets. But this time it was his heart they wanted to display. Desnot the cook, who wandered around during this time wearing a magnificent dragoon's helmet he had picked up in the Tuileries, claims he hadn't acted himself this time. He was simply following the orders of a soldier who, having opened Berthier's stomach with a saber, cut out the heart and handed it to Desnot with these words: "Justice is done, dragoon. Take them this heart." Desnot, followed by the small band of accomplices, wanted to show it to Lafayette, who gave a shudder. Then they wandered around the Palais-Royal, still holding the heart. Eventually they sat down to supper in a tavern. They put the heart on the table and started drinking. But meanwhile a crowd had gathered beneath the windows, calling for Berthier's heart. According to the same account, Desnot threw the heart into the crowd, who then carried it around the garden of the Palais-Royal on a bed of white carnations. He couldn't say more than that.

Yeshuotl the theologian looked up and said to Monsieur Godeau: "If you really wish to regulate your life and judge history, you should at least know how God spends his days. He has kept a certain place in heaven for himself, four cubits by four, and there he studies the Talmud for the first three hours of the day. From the fourth to the seventh hour, God sits and judges the world. But as he sees that the world is guilty, he gets up from the seat of Justice and goes to sit on the throne of Mercy. During the third part of the

day, He sits there and feeds the world, from the rhinoceros to the fleas. During the fourth part of the day, God sits and plays with the Leviathan."

Around Port-Royal

A great somber sky, a deep, revolving, unknown universe, where at times, in certain places and at certain moments, life is brought together, generated, renewed; and man molders in an instant and dies with a thousand insects, on this grassy island that rises and falls in the marsh. Looking up to this sky was the abbey of Port-Royal, built in a hollow of scrubland, where the water sleeps. There, three leagues from Versailles, it was already wilderness.

This cloister, which was bare and weed-strewn in its early days, extended the perspective of arches by mirrors over the passage of time—this cloister that was both school and Cour de Miracles, where recalcitrant Ossianic foundlings, fearsome reapers of tears, haughty executioners of the Reaction and their twins, *souffleurs* of the Revolution, were educated—this cloister … How could it be that from the reform of a convent for young girls, in whose vicinity certain rugged hermits gathered and surveyed the wilderness with a spyglass, how could it happen that ungovernable events could unfurl from such a domestic ball of thread, a slender fiber produced from the maceration of lace, hair shirts, jute, and palm leaves?

The first, dangerous figures of modernity were not atheists and freethinkers, timorous germs of *Freigeisterei*, brought up under the protection of learned commentaries. "Generally speaking," Joseph de Maistre would one day proclaim, "the atheist is quiet.[236] Having lost the moral life, he rots in silence and wages no attack on authority." To threaten the world order, to look up from perpetual submission, would require "a theological club, a place of assembly, *four walls* and nothing more."[237] Those "four walls" were Port-Royal—and in that desolate place, never far

enough away from the snares of passion, in that Thebaid just a few leagues from Versailles, lay the infected gauze that would swathe the world. That solitude did not deceive Maistre. It was a tiny vortex that called up the dead and those not yet born, since "every sect … needs the crowd, especially of women."[238] Feverish chatter formed the halo to that false calm. Maistre recognized in the mad virgins of Port-Royal, in those implacable spiritual snobs, the long line of eager *tricoteuses* at the guillotine; he saw pale women nihilists with suitcases of explosives; he saw the wretched of the earth, the women who would embody the eros of destruction. It is pointless dwelling on the usual foolish Jacobins, always bound by the facts, suffocated by words still incognito. Let us go further back in time, to those women wedded to solitude, to mortification, to self-abasement before an absent Grace: there "the eternal crime of our wretched nature" really did emerge: the realization, in the silence and amid the marshland, that "the human heart is naturally in revolt."[239] For those who go back to that point, it seems obvious indeed that the revolution of 1789 has to be attributed to those few obstinate individuals: "nothing is more vivacious than that sect, and it has certainly shown such fine evidence of life during the revolution that it does not seem possible to consider it dead."[240] An invisible Jansenism is scourging the world. Those learned clerics, austere and ponderous, alien to every royal court, became firebrands, far "more guilty than the vile laborers who completed the task [of the revolution]; for it was Jansenism that struck the first blows at the cornerstone of the edifice."[241] Reading these exasperated words, we see Joseph de Maistre, that "toy soldier of the Holy Spirit," his arms waving in the void.[242] And now it could be thought, as so many tepid souls have done, that his visionary sarcasm detaches him irremediably from reality. But a celestial relationship comes to our aid. For Napoleon, the word *Jansenist* was the worst insult (he was once heard raging against someone, using an ascending scale of invectives: "He's an *idéologue*, a *member of the assembly*, a JANSENIST …"). With the same reaction as the legitimate King Louis XIV, the usurper himself had recognized that those people were the Enemy. And so both of them "denounced [the Enemy], through an instinctive dislike, to all the authorities of the universe."[243] Napoleon read Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* in 1797, in Milan. Cioran has observed, impassively, that those passages "revealed Bonaparte to himself."[244] Indeed, if there is an ultimate truth in the paradox that "the main dogma of Jansenism is entirely that of

Hobbes," then likewise Joseph de Maistre can corroborate the usurper whom he had always abhorred while at the same time relying on him as a supporting witness.[245] Celestial affinities tend to invert relationships. In heaven, atheists are often accused of credulity. Meanwhile, Joseph de Maistre and Bonaparte talk amiably in front of a still sunset, on the terrace at St. Petersburg.

Jansenius

"Monseigneur étudie," "the monsignor is studying," were the only words to be heard outside Jansenius's door.

He died of a plague that he alone in the town had been struck down by. It was rumored among his enemies that he had contracted it through touching infected documents in the archives.

At the Frankfurt Fair of September 1640, everyone was talking about Jansenius's *Augustinus.*

The Superintendent of Gardens

He sent sealed baskets of fruit that held the fragrance of certain pears selected with great care from hundreds of trees, and packed in such a way that they would not bruise the other pears around them.

Hamon

Orans, legens, latens, silens.

At Port-Royal, he was the physician par excellence. He was known as one of the brightest examples of the calm, sad beauty of a Christian heading toward decline, who contemplates and meditates upon the immutable harmonies of nature, but nonetheless devours the heart of charity with childish self-denial. His general manner of expression was that of smiling humility. Austerity combined with elegance. He was suspected of talking about Grace through riddles, using medical terms.

As the night of his death approached, he was heard from time to time to repeat the word *silence*. And sometimes: "Jesus, Maria, sponsus et sponsa," Jesus, Mary, groom and bride.

In his final years he was seen traveling from village to village on a donkey, with an open book on a lectern fixed to the saddle. Among the pages were small slips of red paper that marked the passages most dear to him. Even if all around was featureless glade, he always imagined himself in an enchanted forest where every object concealed another object that was more real.

He had been the tutor of Racine, who had asked in his will to be buried beside him.

Pascal

He was to be found, above all, in the rock of the mind: a logical, geometrical spirit, a scrutinizer of causes, transparent, torrid, eloquent, he found new ways of measuring the desert of the sky. It was not hard to recognize in him the perfection of the human intellect at its clearest, its most distinct, its most detached in relation to the universe, from which he was separated by a dark moat that made it impossible to glimpse any analogy between the automatic existence of nature and the incursions of Grace.

Madame de Genlis used to describe with verve how, sometime around 1789, the Duc d'Orléans, toiling away with his experiments in alchemy, needed a skeleton, and they could find nothing better to offer him than that of *pauvre Pascal,* buried at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont.

—I had no difficulty putting into practice my great fencing skill, covering my arm with the clerical cassock. What did I care about circumstance and disguise, provided that this was a duel to the death?

—If his perception of the immeasurable was so factious, no form of harmonious mediation could affect it. And yet there is one such form of mediation that, in its proportions, adapts finite terms to the infinite and, without thereby creating an impossible bridge between them, establishes there a circulation, allowing that occasional void through which the breath of the supernatural penetrates into the world.

—For man maintains a constant inner conversation that it would be good to regulate, if not to exterminate …

—I now see a time approaching when libertines of the mind will lose all credit and attention, and will be judged importunate and tedious as are our priests of today, not out of any distaste for their views, but because all things will be regarded with indifference, aside from pleasure and business.

—But there is a peculiar connivance between mystics and libertines. They are all antinatural beings, who implicitly accept the void and from it they draw a certain rough and brutal flavor in whatever they say. If Calvary brings them enlightenment, over it they lay, not a graduated landscape, but a vast field plowed by fate, devastated by the force, or dried up by the customs of society.

—Thoughts emerge, tattooed by emotions and memories, like certain enigmatic mythical beings that appear from the waves covered with seaweed. But we are surrounded by an opaqueness that seems to make such an apparition exotic. We are suspicious. We have long pored over words, we have been gripped by keen sensations, but not for this can we say we have had thoughts …

—You ask me what impression I have of les Solitaires? Well, as a saint dear to me once said, I often see them weighed down by pride and arrogance, stuck in their poor cells like a venomous dragon in its cave.

—*Fascinatio nugacitatis*, a fascination for trifles.

Saint-Cyran

So the corpse of Monsieur de Saint-Cyran had to be divided up, fixed as it was, majestically, in the posture in which death had overcome him, and with such a grave expression on his face that it was thought none of his bitter enemies would have withstood his blind gaze. His heart, then, was assigned to Monsieur d'Andilly, in accordance with a long-standing pact between him and Monsieur de Saint-Cyran, by which, once he had taken possession of the coveted heart, he would shut himself off from the world. The entrails were set aside for the devotion of Mother Angélique. Lancelot had the task of severing the hands of Monsieur de Saint-Cyran, but his possession of them was contested by Monsieur Le Maître, who, having arrived late, was not satisfied with the "trifling relics" of the corpse of

Monsieur de Saint-Cyran that were left for him at that point—relics which were then buried within the walls of Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas.

Jenkins

He was known as Monsieur François, gardener of Port-Royal. He came from far away. An English gentleman, a disciple of Monsieur Le Maître who had come to seek his guidance over a lawsuit and had been converted by him to the spirit.

When the twelve rebel nuns were removed from the cloister, the archbishop, accompanied by a group of fifteen officials, asked to visit the garden. There they found Monsieur Jenkins hoeing. The archbishop went up to him and ordered him to leave the place immediately. In a worldly tone, he then continued: "You are more suited to bearing a sword than a hoe." Jenkins looked up, his face prematurely wrinkled, his cheeks flushed. With that gentle irony sometimes found among saints, he replied: "I have been here twenty years and have never asked for money, for I believed I would end my days here; but if you wish to send me away, you must remunerate me for all the past." These words were too shrewd for the archbishop, who muttered in embarrassment: "Better the sword, better the sword."

He died after forty years of service to the sisters. On his tomb, overgrown with weeds, where long grass snakes slither, you can still read the epitaph that Monsieur Dodart had written for him: "Always at work, outdoors, always silent, always alone before God, to whom he turned in frequent prayer; never inactive, except during divine service, never hasty except to be among the first there, kind to all, smiling and at peace, familiar only with God."

Flavie Passart

When she was a novice, she kept as holy relics the fleas she found on Mother Geneviève Le Tardif, because they had sucked her blood. She had grown up among visions, ghosts, and necromancy, which she sometimes described to the girls in her charge. She applied the Holy Thorn to the tear duct of little Margot, who was cured after a few hours. News of the miracle brought a stop to the impending persecution. When she was shown the Formulary of the Five Propositions, no one was at first more fervent in refusing to yield. For three years, holy visions told her constantly she

should not sign. Meanwhile she was also humiliated by certain other sisters for her thoughtlessness. In the end she signed—and it was she who gave Monsieur Chamillard the list of nuns who would be forcibly carried away from the monastery.

Angélique de Saint-Jean d'Arnauld d'Andilly

To the officers of justice and the bowmen who had come to take her away, she gave her name with the pride of one who sees in every conflict the traces of that struggle between the Arnauld family, ambassadors of God, and the world, represented by the Jesuits. She pursued an ideal of quiet heroism and haughty restraint, but she was obsessed by a constant dread that her lamp might go out. In an all-too-vivid dream, the detested Flavie Passart, avid collector of holy relics, appeared to her, taking the place of the Mother Superior and sending off the sisters. Off where? As for her, she was sent to a tiny cell at the convent of the Sisters of the Annunciation. Behind her were three locked doors that were opened three times a day. She felt she was in an unknown land, in a place from which she had no possibility of escaping along any path shorter than the whole of her remaining life. To prevent herself hearing the word of the Jesuits, she celebrated the divine services alone in her prison, singing and turning around the room in procession. With holy water, she sprinkled the bed to drive away the spirit of sloth; the table where she ate, to drive away luxury; the space between the bed and the wall that she used as an oratory, to drive away distraction; the place where she worked, to drive away curiosity and attachment to her work, which consisted of decorating reliquaries; and most of all the door of the cell, fearing that the spirit of seduction might enter. Her hours of happiness were at night: "I wish it could be seen how beautiful and pious all this is: to be alone like this, in the middle of the night, blessing God in a prison and singing his praises, being heard only by him, and hearing nothing except a deep silence in the midst of that great city, whose noise can still be heard at that hour, since the carriages still pass until well past eleven o'clock.[246] In all this there is something more beautiful and irresistible than anything that can be described …" In the face of such words, Sainte-Beuve had to admit what it was he had spent many years searching for at Port-Royal: "If I, a layman and once a poet, who searches for poetry in everything, and also (need it be said?) in religion, am sometimes able to find it at Port-Royal, it is in this very place, it is that

which I have just seen, and none other, a poetry with no sun and with no flower, which is all in intimacy and in fragrance."[247]

Mother Angélique suddenly left the convent of the Sisters of the Annunciation in the archbishop's carriage. That journey in the darkness of a July night, through deserted squares, brought verses rushing to her mind. She still believed "this poetry was indistinguishable from religion itself."[248] Here, once again, Sainte-Beuve paused for several lines to ponder his secret, which, as always, had gone unnoticed: "A girl from Smirne or Chios, traveling by night, would have found in her memory the verses of Homer; a girl of today would have had the verses of Byron or Lamartine: yet she has only verses that at every step bear witness to the God of the Hebrews and of the Gospel.[249] The flower has no time to bloom and fall before these events that are too real and too serious not to be daunting: to believe too much, *to believe too truly*, is not a happy state for the game of the imagination. Alas! one must not even feel too much. Should we say that this flower and this golden fruit is never to be picked except by lightly separating it from its ground?" Modern man cannot believe too firmly, but not because he has no wish to believe. Another strict devotion requires him to adhere to a certain falsity, sufficient to give breathing space to the imagination, which would otherwise be stifled, akin to suffocation in a dense substance. All of modernity is in that *light separation from its ground*, in that minuscule disjunction, in that imperceptible aperture that allows the void to circulate, in that unreal cutting edge that now separates every faith, every passion from itself.

CHRISTINE BRIQUET: I was infatuated by a certain aristocracy of devotion and found Port-Royal to be the place in the world that best understood what Grace is. Thus I was admitted to a sect of refined, kindred spirits, scornful of those who did not speak their language. It was said we were as pure as Angels and proud as Demons.

During our period of reclusion we sometimes strolled in the garden, among the plants tended by Mr. Jenkins, accompanied by the quiet incandescence of the sexual organs of the fireflies. On certain clear, frosty nights we even approached the outer wall. Immediately beyond it, between the glistening boughs of a tree, we could see the black outline

of Monsieur de Sainte-Marthe, who murmured devotional discourses to us.

For a long time, as our sterner sisters well know, we were anxious to find out what is *le Vernis des Maîtres*, the finish of the Old Masters. We sat in a circle around the stone ring that marked the edge of our lush garden. Finally we agreed on the solution offered by little Marceline, who saw in it, first of all, a transparent unity, a sort of fusion in which all things, losing their original appearance as things, are each arranged beside the others in a certain order, penetrated by one and the same light, each reflected in the others, without a single word remaining outside, immune to such assimilation. Until her high-pitched voice had intimated these cogent definitions, we had searched long for a Rule to which we ourselves could be bound. And we did not know that sometimes our own Augustine himself, in the contrivances of that mechanism of his that killed off the Pelagians in whatever disguise, had concealed clear indications that might enable us to approach that place that we abhorred and at the same time craved—namely *le Vernis des Maîtres.* Unswerving light: patina of Grace! It was there that we recognized you, where we least wanted to find you, in the subtle play of forms and in the exchange of semblances! It was a solemn moment for us—and it can be said that this was when the first silent rift appeared in the abbey of Port-Royal-des-Champs.

ABBÉ DE SAINT-PIERRE: It was, I think, the autumn of 1687, in Paris, and while nature was divesting itself of all its colors and leaving them to macerate for just a few days before churning them into sludge along the carriageways, I was tirelessly assembling the detailed *memoranda* and *obiter dicta* of famous men to which I could obtain access. Among the ashen stars of the Abbey, I was attracted, more than any other, to Monsieur Pascal—and I resolved to find in the peculiarities of his demeanor the sign that might guide me to certain brusque impulses in the Pensées. At that time I occasionally visited Monsieur Nicole in Place du Puits-l'Hermite, and the conversation was divided between his recollections of the amiable Monsieur de Tréville, always in the company of ladies, and those about Monsieur Pascal, which were of far more concern to me. But Monsieur Nicole noticed this insatiable interest of mine and, furrowing even more the multitude of wrinkles

around his eyes in order to accentuate his expression without changing his voice, he said: “My dear Abbé de Saint-Pierre, I feel that your eagerness betrays you in your search for memories of our glorious men. You think of the Spirit like you used to dream as a child of being received at Court. And nothing seemed so royal to you as the harshness of Monsieur Pascal. But you didn’t know him, and your pleasure in that image of him is pointless. There’s one thing, at least, that you do not know: he was a collector of seashells.”

The Ruin of Kasch

Four meleks (kings) ruled the great realm—the first in Nubia, the second in Habesch, the third in Kordofan, and the fourth in For.

The wealthiest of these was the Nap of Naphta, in Kordofan. His capital lay in the direction of Hophrat-en-Nahas. The king owned all the gold and copper. His gold and copper was transported to Nubia, where the great kings of the west searched it out. Ambassadors came over the sea from the east and, in the south, the king ruled many peoples, who forged iron weapons for him and sent slaves. Thousands of these lived at the Court of the Nap.

The Nap of Naphta was the richest man on earth. But his life was shorter and sadder than that of all men. For each Nap of Naphta could rule his land for only a certain number of years. During his reign the priests studied the stars every evening, offered sacrifices, and lit fires. They could never stop their praying and their sacrifices, otherwise they would lose sight of the path taken by a star and they wouldn’t know when the king was to be killed in accordance with their law. It continued like this for a long time. Day after day, year after year, the priests studied the stars and recognized the day on which the king was to be killed.

And once again the day of the king’s death arrived. They broke the hind legs of the bulls. All the fires in the kingdom were put out. The women were closed inside their houses. The priests lit the new fire. They called the

new king. The new king was the son of the sister of the one who had just been killed. The new king was called Akaf; it was under him that a change was made affecting the kingdom's ancient institutions. But the people say this change was the reason for the ruin of Naphta.

The first act of the new Nap was to decide who, at the established time, would accompany him in death. The Nap chose these companions from among those who were dearest to him. Sometime earlier, a king from the Far East had sent a man over the sea to Naphta who was famous for his skill as a storyteller. The man's name was Far-li-mas. That was how Far-li-mas had arrived at the Court of Nap along with some slaves. King Akaf had seen him. And King Akaf liked Far-li-mas. And King Akaf said: "This man will be my first companion. For all of the time I have left before my end, he will entertain me with his stories. And he will also cheer me after my death."

When Far-li-mas heard the king's decision he was not afraid. He just said to himself: "God wills it."

At that time it was the custom in Naphta to keep a fire perpetually burning, as is still done in the remote lands of For. The priests chose a boy and a girl to keep this fire always alight. They had to guard the fire and lead a chaste life. And they, too, were killed, not with the king, but when the new fire was lit. At the moment when the new fire was lit for King Akaf, the priests chose the new king's youngest sister to keep the fire. Her name was Sali (at least that was what they called her—her full name was Sali-fu-Hamr). When Sali heard the choice had fallen on her, she was afraid. And then Sali felt a great fear of death.

For a certain period the king lived happily and full of joy; for he enjoyed the wealth and splendor of his country; he spent each evening with friends, and with foreigners who had come as ambassadors to the land of Naphta. But one evening God sent him the thought that each of those joyful days was taking him one day closer to certain death. The king was afraid. The king tried to banish the thought. But he couldn't. King Akaf became very sad. And then God sent him a second thought: that he should send for Far-li-mas and get him to tell a story.

Far-li-mas was called. Far-li-mas came. The king said: "Far-li-mas, the day has arrived when you must cheer me. Tell me a story." Far-li-mas said: "No sooner said than done." Far-li-mas began his story. King Akaf listened. The guests listened. The king and the guests forgot about drinking. They forgot about breathing. The slaves forgot about serving. Far-li-mas's story

was like hashish. When he had finished, all were swathed in a benign unconsciousness. King Akaf had forgotten his thoughts about death. None of those present had realized that Far-li-mas's story had lasted from the evening to the morning. When the guests left, the sun was already high.

Next day King Akaf and his guests were impatient for evening to arrive, for Far-li-mas to begin his story. Now Far-li-mas had to tell a story every evening. News about Far-li-mas's tales spread around the Court, the capital, the country. But the tales of Far-li-mas were better every night. And each day the king gave him a fine robe, the guests and the ambassadors presented him with gold and precious stones. When he wandered through the streets, he was followed by a swarm of slaves. The people loved him. The people began to bare their breasts before him.

News of the wondrous stories of Far-li-mas reached far and wide. Sali also came to hear of it. Sali sent a message to her brother the king: "Let me hear the stories of Far-li-mas just once." The king replied: "Your wish is my command." And Sali came. Sali wanted to hear the story. Far-li-mas saw Sali. For an instant, Far-li-mas lost his senses. Far-li-mas could see only Sali. Sali could see only Far-li-mas. King Akaf said: "Why do you say nothing? Do you not know any more stories?" Far-li-mas tore his gaze from Sali and began his story. Far-li-mas's story was first like hashish when it produces a light stupor, then it was like hashish that makes us sleepy and fall into unconsciousness. After some time the guests fell asleep, King Akaf fell asleep. They now continued to hear the story in their dreams, until they were overcome by total ecstasy. Only Sali kept her eyes open. Her eyes were fixed on Far-li-mas. Her eyes absorbed the whole of Far-li-mas. Sali was overcome by Far-li-mas.

As soon as Far-li-mas had finished, he stood up. Sali stood up. Far-li-mas went toward Sali. Sali went toward Far-li-mas. Far-li-mas embraced Sali. Sali embraced Far-li-mas and said: "We do not want to die." Far-li-mas smiled into Sali's eyes and said: "The will is in you. Show me the way." Sali said: "Now leave me. I will seek the way. When I have found it, I will call you." Sali and Far-li-mas parted. The king and his guests slept.

Next day, Sali went to the chief priest and said: "Who decides on which day the old fire has to be put out and the new one lit?" The priest said: "God decides." Sali said: "How does God communicate his will?" The priest said: "Every evening we study the stars. We never lose sight of them. Every night we see the moon and every day we know what star moves closer or farther

away from her. And in this way we know the hour." Sali said: "Do you have to do it every night? What happens if one night you see nothing?" The priest said: "If one night we see nothing, we have to offer a sacrifice. If for many nights we see nothing, then we would no longer know how to calculate the hour." Sali said: "Then you would not know at what moment you had to put out the fire?" The priest said: "No, then we would no longer be able to carry out our task." Sali said: "Great are the works of God. But the greatest of them is not his writing in the sky. The greatest of them is life on earth. I came to realize it last night." The priest said: "What do you mean?" Sali said: "God has given Far-li-mas the gift of telling stories, as he had never done before. This is greater than the writing in the sky." The chief priest said: "You are wrong." Sali said: "You know the moon and the stars. Have you ever heard the stories of Far-li-mas?" The priest said: "No, I have never heard them." Sali said: "Then how can you make a judgment? I tell you: listening to him, all of you will forget to study the stars." The chief priest said: "Do you really say this, sister of the king?" Sali said: "Then show me I'm wrong, that the writing in the sky is more powerful and greater than life on earth." The priest said: "I shall prove it."

The chief priest had a message sent to King Akaf: "Please allow the priests to come this evening to your palace to hear the stories of Far-li-mas from sunset until the moon rises." King Akaf replied: "I agree." Sali had a message sent to Far-li-mas: "Today you must tell a story like yesterday. This is the way."

When evening came, King Akaf assembled his guests and the ambassadors. Sali came and sat beside him. All the priests came. They bared their breasts and fell to the ground. The chief priest said: "The stories of this Far-li-mas must be God's most splendid work." King Akaf said: "Decide this for yourselves." The chief priest said: "Forgive us, our king, if we leave your house when the moon rises to carry out our duties." King Akaf said: "Do as God wills." The priests sat down. All of the guests and ambassadors sat down. The hall was full. Far-li-mas came forward. King Akaf said: "Begin, my companion in death."

Far-li-mas looked at Sali. Sali looked at Far-li-mas. King Akaf said: "Why do you say nothing? Do you not know any more stories?" Far-li-mas turned his eyes away from Sali. Far-li-mas commenced. His story began at sunset. His story was like hashish, which blurs and entrances. His story became like hashish, which leads to languor. His story became like hashish,

which induces a fatal swoon. When the moon rose, King Akaf, his guests and the ambassadors were dozing, the priests were all stretched out fast asleep. Only Sali was awake, and she absorbed with her gaze the ever sweeter words that came from Far-li-mas's lips.

Far-li-mas reached the end. He stood up. Far-li-mas went toward Sali. Sali went toward Far-li-mas. Sali said: "Let me kiss these lips from which such sweet words come." They kissed each other's lips passionately. Far-li-mas said: "Let me embrace this body, which on seeing it gives me strength." And they embraced, wrapping their arms and legs around each other, and they lay there in the midst of so many sleeping figures, and were happy until their hearts almost broke. But Sali rejoiced and said: "Do you see the way?" Far-li-mas said: "I see it." They left. In the palace only the sleeping figures remained.

Next day, Sali went to the chief priest and said: "Now tell me if you were right to condemn my words." The priest said: "I will not give you an answer today. We shall go once more to listen to this Far-li-mas. For yesterday we were not adequately prepared." Sali said: "All right." The priests performed their sacrifices and recited their prayers. They broke the fetlocks of many oxen. Throughout the day the prayers in the temple were never interrupted. In the evening the priests returned to the palace of King Akaf. In the evening Sali sat once again beside her brother, King Akaf. In the evening Far-li-mas resumed his story. And before daybreak everyone was asleep in the ecstasy of listening. But in the middle of all of them sat Sali and Far-li-mas, and they sucked happiness from each other's lips and wrapped their arms and legs around each other. And so it continued, day after day.

First of all the news of Far-li-mas's stories spread among the people. Then it was rumored the priests were neglecting the nightly sacrifices and prayers. Great anxiety took hold of everyone. One day an important man of the city met the chief priest. The important man said to the priest: "When are we celebrating the next feast this year? I would like to make a journey and to be back in time for the feast. How long is it before the feast day?" The priest was embarrassed. It was now several days since he had seen the moon and the stars. He no longer knew anything about their course. The priest said: "Wait another day and I'll be able to tell you." The important man said: "Thank you. Tomorrow I'll come back to you."

The chief priest called together his priests and said: "Which of you has recently seen the course of the stars?" None of the priests answered, since

all had been listening to the stories of Far-li-mas. The chief priest asked again: “Has not one of you seen the course of the stars and the position of the moon?” All of the priests remained silent, until one of them, who was very old, stood up and said: “We were all in ecstasy, lying there before Far-li-mas. No one can tell you on what day the feasts have to be celebrated, when the fire has to be extinguished and when the new one will have to be lit.” The chief priest shuddered and said: “How could all this have happened? What shall I say to the people?” The old priest said: “It is God’s will. But if this Far-li-mas has not been sent by God, then have him killed. For, so long as he lives and speaks, everyone will stay listening to him.” The chief priest said: “What must I say to the people?” Everyone remained silent. Then they parted.

The chief priest went to Sali. And he said to her: “What words did you say on the first day?” Sali said: “I said: ‘God’s works are great. But the greatest of them is not the writing in the sky, but life on earth.’ You criticized my words, calling them ‘wrong.’ Tell me today whether I have lied.” The priest said: “Far-li-mas is against God. Far-li-mas must die.” Sali said: “Far-li-mas is the companion in death of King Akaf.” The priest said: “I will speak with King Akaf.” Sali said: “God is in my brother, King Akaf. Ask him what are his thoughts.” The chief priest went to King Akaf: his sister, Sali, was sitting beside him. The priest bared himself before King Akaf, prostrated himself and said: “Forgive me, King Akaf!” The king said: “Tell me what is troubling you.” The priest replied: “Tell me about your companion in death, this Far-li-mas.” The king said: “In the beginning God sent me the thought about my death, about its day that was approaching, and I was terrified. Then God sent me the thought about this Far-li-mas, who had been sent as a gift from the Orient beyond the sea. With the first thought God darkened my mind. With the second thought he cheered my soul and made me and others happy! For this I have given Far-li-mas many robes. My friends have given him gold and precious stones. He has made great donations to the people. Now he is rich, as becomes him, and the people love him as they love me.” The chief priest said: “Far-li-mas must die. Far-li-mas is destroying order.” King Akaf said: “I am to die before Far-li-mas.” The chief priest said: “God will decide the matter.” King Akaf said: “So it is. All the people shall see it.” The chief priest went away. Sali spoke to King Akaf: “King Akaf, my brother, the way is coming to an end. The companion of your death will be the person who shall awaken you to life;

but I want him to be the happiness of my existence." King Akaf said: "Then take him, sister Sali."

Messengers ran around all districts of the city announcing that Far-li-mas would be speaking that evening in the main square in front of the people. In the main square, a veiled chair was erected for the king between the king's palace and the houses of the priests. When it was evening, the people gathered from every part and settled themselves in a circle. Thousands and thousands of people had assembled. The priests came and took their place. The guests and the ambassadors came and took their place. Sali sat beside the veiled King Akaf. Far-li-mas was called.

Far-li-mas came. All of Far-li-mas's servants followed him. They were all dressed in magnificent robes. Far-li-mas's servants sat beside the priests. Far-li-mas prostrated himself before King Akaf. Then he took his place.

The chief priest stood up and said: "Far-li-mas has destroyed order at Naphta. Tonight he will show whether this was God's will." The priest sat down. Far-li-mas stood up. He looked Sali in the eyes. Far-li-mas turned his gaze from Sali and toward the crowd. Far-li-mas looked at the priests. Far-li-mas said: "I am a servant of God and believe he abhors all evil in the hearts of men. Tonight God shall decide." Far-li-mas began his story. The words that came from Far-li-mas's mouth were as sweet as honey. His voice penetrated the listeners like the first summer rain on parched land. From Far-li-mas's mouth came a perfume more subtle than musk or incense. Far-li-mas's head shone like a torch, alone in the black of night.

Far-li-mas's story was at first like hashish, which makes wakefulness happy. Then it was like hashish, which makes dreams delirious. As morning approached Far-li-mas raised his voice. His words swelled like the Nile that rises in the hearts of men. For some his words brought peace, but for others they were as terrifying as the apparition of Azrael, the angel of death. Happiness overwhelmed the souls of some, horror the hearts of others. As morning drew ever nearer, the more powerful his voice became, the more its sound echoed in the people. The hearts of the people rose against each other, as in battle. They raged against each other, like the clouds in the sky on a stormy night. Flashes of anger clashed with thunderbolts of fury. When the sun rose, Far-li-mas reached the end of his story. The confused minds of the people were overwhelmed with indescribable amazement. For when those still alive looked around them, their eyes fell on the priests. The priests were lying on the ground, dead.

Sali stood up. Sali prostrated herself before the king. Sali said: “King Akaf, my brother, throw off the veil, show yourself to your people and perform, now, the sacrifice; for these beings have been struck down by Azrael, through God’s command.” The servants removed the veils from the throne. King Akaf stood up. He was the first king the people of Naphta had seen. And King Akaf was handsome as the rising sun.

The people rejoiced. A white horse was brought in, onto which the king leaped. To his left was his sister, Sali-fu-Hamr, to his right Far-li-mas. The king rode as far as the temple. Inside the temple the king took a spade and dug three holes in the holy ground. He put three seeds into them. The king dug two holes in the holy ground. Sali put two seeds into them. And immediately the five seeds sprouted and grew before the eyes of the people. At noon the five plants had produced ripe ears of corn. In all the courtyards of the city, fathers broke the fetlocks of great bulls. The king extinguished the fire. All fathers in the city put out the fires in their hearths, Sali lit a new fire, and all the virgins came to take from it.

From that day no one else was killed in Naphta. King Akaf was the first king of Naphta to live until it pleased God to take him away, in old age. When he died, Far-li-mas was his successor. With him, Naphta reached its highest point of happiness and its end.

For King Akaf’s fame as a wise and well-counseled ruler soon spread through all countries. All princes sent him gifts and wise men, who came to seek advice. All the great merchants settled in the city of Naphta. King Akaf had many large ships on the eastern coast that transported goods from Naphta to every part of the world. There were not enough gold and copper mines in Naphta to keep the workshops full. When Far-li-mas succeeded King Akaf, the happiness of the country reached its highest point. His fame spread through all countries, from the eastern sea to the western sea. But his fame also sowed the seed of envy in the hearts of men. When Far-li-mas died, the neighboring countries broke their agreements and began a war against Naphta. Naphta was defeated. Naphta was destroyed, and with it the most powerful palace of the great realm. The great realm fell to pieces. It was overrun by savage peoples. The gold and silver mines were forgotten. The cities vanished. Nothing is left of Naphta, except Far-li-mas’s stories, which he had brought with him from the land beyond the eastern sea.

This is the story of the ruin of the land of Kasch. Its last children live in the land of For.

Among the Ruins of Kasch

Leo Frobenius set out on his fifth African expedition in early 1912. He had only just returned from Africa: “All I needed was three days in the Tyrol to embrace my young daughter, my wife and my brother, and then straight back to Africa, but this time to the eastern part.

“Suez—

Port Sudan—

Khartoum—

El Obeid—

“And here we are—and once again we’re swimming in happiness.”[250] He was searching for the passage to the lost mines of Hophrat-en-Nahas. They reached El Obeid as preparations were under way for a solemn celebration in honor of Lord Kitchener and Sir Reginald Wingate. Frobenius was not expecting this; his thoughts were quite elsewhere. But for the celebration, the “great man of For” had sent to El Obeid “ambassadors and gifts and a miscellany of other things … A miscellany! For example, a very old camel driver called Arach ben Hassul, who carries in his heart the most wondrous legend of the past.[251] The legend of Kasch or Napata.—Now you’re all ears, my friend, aren’t you?—It’s quite crazy! Served on a plate, in little more than half an hour, knowledge going back a thousand years!—After all our discussions on these matters, you’ll immediately understand, of course, what it means to me if this old bearer of myths can say how it happened that a king of the East sent one of his messengers to the Court of Napata, and this messenger tells wondrous tales and then changes the form of the State. The king from the far East, over the sea!—it could only be some place in the Indian Ocean. Would it be better, perhaps, in future to call the Indian Ocean the *Kaschitic* Ocean?”

And so it happened that the camel driver Arach ben Hassul told the tale of the ruin of Kasch: “… ambassadors and representatives came from all regions to pay homage. They also included inhabitants from For. They stood out from everyone else for their splendid camels, and there was even

to be a camel race. An old man, a great expert, had come to Obeid to look after these racing camels; his name was Arach ben Hassul, whose ancestors had belonged to an ancient guild in Kordofan that worked copper. Long extinct in that land, the guild's last descendents live in Dar For … No less extraordinary than the man himself was his way of revealing his knowledge. For seven days he remained seated with the others, among the storytellers who had gathered around me. For seven days he sipped his coffee like the others. For seven days he spoke no more than a few words of salutation when he came and left. To every question on ancient matters he answered: 'Don't know.' For seven days he remained listening to the stories recorded in this volume [the fourth volume of *Atlantis*, where the story of the ruin of Kasch was published for the first time], in deep concentration and inconspicuous, apart from the way in which he paid attention.

"But on the eighth day he stood up, ran his hand down his face from his eyes to his chin, and said: 'I speak.'

"After which he climbed down from the *angareb*, sat on the ground, and asked the storytellers from Kordofan: 'Do you know what you are recounting to the *taleb*? You don't.[252] It is difficult to know.' Then he drew a line in the sand and said: 'This is For.' He drew another line and said: 'This is Napht. For was son of Napht.' He drew another line and said: 'This is Habesch. Napht was son of Habesch.' He drew a fourth line and said: 'This is Kasch. Habesch and his brother Masr were sons of Kasch. Kasch was the *mahdi* of Kordofan. He came from far away, across the sea. The stories you are telling are stories from the time of Kasch, and among these stories there is another story, which however you cannot understand, since everything at that time was different from today. Today in Kordofan there are trees scattered here and there, but at that time there were many, many trees. Today in Kordofan there are barren fields, at that time they were fertile. Today in Kordofan there is little rain, at that time there was plenty. Today in Kordofan there are a few small villages. At that time there were great cities, larger than in Egypt. Today in Kordofan there is no one left who can work copper and gold and iron and brass. At that time all the copper, all the gold, all the brass in the world came from Kordofan. At that time Kordofan was ruled by great *melek* (kings), and all peoples brought gifts to the *melek*. Your stories have come down from that period, and there is a story about how those stories were told. But you could not understand it.' "

Years later, Frobenius reflected on what Arach ben Hassul had said: “The storyteller began by saying that For (the first lord of Dar For) was son of Napht, and Napht was son of Habesch (Abyssinia), but Habesch and his brother Masr (Egypt) were said to be sons of Kasch.[253] It is not hard to realize that Napht or Napata was the first lord of what is today Nubia (which reached its height at one time with Meroe). But it is very curious that Kasch (which inevitably brings to mind the Kushites of the Egyptians, and of the Torah) is specifically described as lord of Kordofan, hence of a region that today is a desolate land that has become the home of nomadic marauders of more or less knightly tradition.” El Obeid, the largest city of Kordofan, was where Frobenius had heard the story of the ruin of Kasch. There the men sit for hours in coffee shops and talk about prices and harvests. Nothing else seems to exist for them, nothing seems to have happened before those monotonous conversations of theirs. “I have never been to a region of Africa where the landscape is so uniform and speaks so little of the past as in this central region of the lands of the Nile.[254] And I have never seen a population that has such a scarce insight into things, that is so unmoved, so indifferent to questions about where we come from and where we are going.” But that desolation, which separated ancient times with a thick veil, was one day visited by the breath of stories: that breath came from “eastern Kasch,” from *Arabia felix*, and perhaps even farther away: from the western coasts of India.[255] One day it had brought the doctrine about the ritual killing of the king, one day it brought the story of the ruin of Kasch and the aroma of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

Years later, Frobenius reflected on the “paideumatic” phase to which the history of the ruin of Kasch belongs: “The legend of the ruin of Kasch has to be late, very late.[256] It is the memory of a state of things long vanished: a memory of that time when men, with total abnegation that went as far as sacrificing themselves, ‘enacted’ the destiny of the stars. It belongs, however, not to the age when that attitude was flourishing but to the time when it was already on the wane—when this feeling in men had become dim and everyone was beginning to yield to the need to form concepts, at the expense of their vitality. All in all, this is already a depiction. The idea of *what is historical* has taken life here. This creation portrays, to some extent, the process with which crucial parts of the field of civilization have dissociated themselves from everything else and have entered into

profanity. It is a most singular creation, and I am unable to quote anything else like it in any part of world literature."

This is the story about the passage from one world to another, from one order to another—and about the ruin of both. It is the story of the precariousness of order: of the old order and the new. The story of their perpetual ruin.

Scheherazade, Far-li-mas: the stories postpone death, but they don't suspend it. What they suspend is the death sentence.

Joseph de Maistre is one of the priests of Naphta.

When men played the role of the stars, they were strangled with a black noose.

The law can be observed by a single subject. Sacrifice requires a dual subject. In the law we therefore recognize the exotericism of sacrifice. In its esoteric ground, the sacrifice can yield only to the story, which defeats it in the ordeal. The story is the esoteric of the esoteric, the secret of the secret: it teaches how to live outside the cycle, in the hashish-like suspension of the word. It is the way of life revealed after the defeat of the sacrifice—and yet it maintains the gesture of the sacrifice, diluted in every gesture. But that is not enough to save Kasch, indeed it hastens its ruin. For many generations the priests had strangled the king after studying the stars, for a few years the inhabitants of Naphta survived on the memory of Far-li-mas's words, before Naphta was destroyed. "Nothing is left of Naphta, except Far-li-mas's stories, which he had brought with him from the land beyond the eastern sea."

From a distance, Far-li-mas and Sali seem like the heroes of a new order based on the revolt against sacrifice. From close up, Far-li-mas and Sali are elements of the sacrifice that defeat other elements of the sacrifice. They shift the weight and emphasis. They are unraveling the knot of communion and expulsion, of hierogamy and assassination, in an entirely new way. For the story to succeed in supplanting the blood sacrifice it has to contain something in it that is no less powerful than *soma*, the mysterious substance of Vedic sacrifice. And *soma* is the word of Far-li-mas. Hierogamy is the

coupling of Sali and Far-li-mas "wrapping their arms and legs around each other in the midst of so many sleeping figures." Sacrificial expulsion is the death of the priests, struck down by Far-li-mas's ordeal by word. To escape from the constraint of the blood sacrifice, Far-li-mas and Sali vary the ancient sacrificial story of Mo-ye and Kan-tsiang:

"Mo-ye and Kan-tsiang, male and female, are a couple of swords: they are also husband and wife, a couple of metalworkers.

"Kan-tsiang, the husband, having received orders to forge *two* swords, set to work, but failed to fuse the metal after three months of trying. When his wife, Mo-ye, asked the reason for his failure, he at first avoided answering. She insisted, reminding him of the principle by which the transformation of *holy material* (which is the metal) demanded (the sacrifice of) a person. Kan-tsiang then told how his master had succeeded in carrying out the fusion only by throwing *himself and his wife* into the furnace. Mo-ye declared herself ready to give her body, if her husband would have his own body fused.

"Mo-ye was a good wife. She, no less than her husband, deserved to give her name to one of the swords. Her devotion was total. But it did not go as far as having her body immediately consumed. Like Yu the Great, T'ang, and the Duke of Cheou, the husband and wife cut their hair and trimmed their nails. *Together,* they threw the nail trimmings and hair into the furnace. They gave part to give the whole.

"As the couple were performing their act of devotion, Yin and Yang *mixed their breaths* to help along the fusion: the bellows were worked by three hundred VIRGIN *girls* AND *boys*.

"Another author repeats this number of three hundred; according to him, VIRGIN *girls* ALONE were called to procure the breath.

"Mo-ye, according to one version, performs the act of devotion ALONE.[257] She throws herself into the furnace. That was a story of holy union, a *marriage* with the god of the furnace." The Chinese irony of the nails and hair in the furnace doesn't hide the original form of the sacrifice: hierogamy and suicide. Sali and Far-li-mas, skilled smelters, separate the elements of the sacrifice. They couple among the sleepers, protected by the veil of the word. And they let the priests be killed, struck down by the word of the ordeal, as by the sword that the sacrifice helps to fuse. The lifeless corpses of the priests substitute those of the hierogamic couple in the furnace, as though they were the nails and hair of Mo-ye and Kan-tsiang.

Sali and Far-li-mas defeat the priests because they remain awake, he narrating, she listening. All is shifted into the simple act of consciousness. In the old order of sacrifice, the post to which the victim was tied existed in the mind and in the world. And there was no possibility of distinction. Everything now goes back to being invisible: the sacrificial offering is the story. What remains visible is the conflict with the previous order, which finds its last victims in the priests. The sacrifice is reabsorbed into perfect wakefulness.

At Naphta there is an ordeal between the order of the blood sacrifice, dependent on stars in the sky, and the order of a life without attachments, which speaks in the stories of Far-li-mas and will be camouflaged in history. In the ordeal, Far-li-mas wins—and history begins. But it is a short-lived victory, a victory for a single dual subject: Far-li-mas and Sali. In truth, both orders are condemned to ruin.

Far-li-mas does not oppose the sacrifice: when Akaf announces that he has chosen him as a "companion in death," Far-li-mas is not frightened. The frightened one is Sali—the victorious Antigone and African Eurydice. And Far-li-mas recognizes in her a "will" that seeks a new "way." Far-li-mas's surging "gift of storytelling," overwhelming only to the point of intoxication, substitutes the "writing in the sky" that dictates the rise of nature and the recurrence of assassinations. As Sali has told the priest, "life on earth"—fluctuating, changeable, with no preestablished order, like the stories of Far-li-mas—has been proved to be a work "greater" than the "writing in the sky." Sali's "way" is in an indelible phrase: "From that day no one else was killed at Naphta."

"If one night we see nothing, we have to offer a sacrifice," say the priests of Naphta. The priests look at the sky in order to read in it the sign of the sacrifice. And they perform a sacrifice when they cannot read the sky. Sacrifice is the end, sacrifice is the means. Sacrifice is what is read and what makes it possible to read. This is the vibrant circle of the old order.

The subject that escapes death in the sacrifice is a dual subject, just as the subject that had constituted the sacrifice was dual. Akaf is saved only through Far-li-mas, his "companion in death," the Upaniṣadic bird that

contemplates, and here tells stories. And Far-li-mas is saved only through Sali, who finds the "way." Hierogamy is the seal of the dual subject.

The state of the world cannot be seen during the day, but at night, observing the positions of the stars. And at night Far-li-mas tells his stories: the priests—whose task it is to keep awake and dedicate their vigil to the contemplation of the sky—fall asleep, overwhelmed by the words spoken by Far-li-mas, while his gaze joins that of Sali in perfect wakefulness. The breath of history can be felt in this double course, from sleep to wakefulness and wakefulness to sleep.

The end of the priests killed in the ordeal is just as impressive as the crudeness and swiftness of the ruin of Naphta after Far-li-mas. Envious neighbors overpower and destroy Naphta, which has meanwhile become a prosperous trading center. There is nothing more to say. The old order had ended instead among visions that swelled men's hearts like the Nile.

Once the priests become victims, at the center of the sacrificial circle formed by thousands and thousands of people, the king's veil is lifted. Fruit of this last sacrifice are the plants that Akaf and Sali sow after the death of the priests, and which immediately sprout. The veil that is lifted from the king is now the sign of entry into the order of overt, unprotected esotericism, abandoned to the raging flux of events.

The ruin of Kasch takes place *after* the death of King Akaf. And Akaf, while not sacrificing himself, had maintained the practice of sacrifice until the end. But Far-li-mas cannot perform the sacrifice: he is neither priest nor king: he is just *the other part* of the last king. The kings have become extinct with Akaf, the priests have had to die in the ordeal. The king who is not sacrificed is the last king. He cannot pass his life on to a successor. It is the reverse of the modern situation: Louis XVI, the first king to be sacrificed (Charles I doesn't qualify as an example) marks the end of royal sovereignty.

Far-li-mas marks the beginning of another reign: the reign of the word, after that of bloodshed. It is a reign that does not kill by way of ritual, but stirs death through a rapid, indomitable disorder that supervenes. The words of Far-li-mas replace the sacrifice: like the sacrifice, they have the power to command obedience: but they don't have the power to establish time cycles.

Time is now just the swing of the pendulum between one empty flow, devoid of attachments, and the suspension caused by the drug of the word. Far-li-mas's words have a power of their own, but they cannot reflect the position of the stars.

Far-li-mas manages to postpone death: it will no longer be blood sacrifice, but it will be the dark and all-consuming ruin of Kasch. Yet one thing escapes that ruin: his words. Under the reign of the priests, nothing would have escaped. The divine hand would have destroyed the realm in silence. But one voice still tells the story of the ruin of Kasch.

The story of the kingdom of Kasch teaches how sacrifice is the cause of ruin and also how the absence of sacrifice is the cause of ruin. This pair of simultaneous and contradictory truths points to a single and darker truth, which rests in the stillness: society is the ruin. And from this obscurity we are pointed to something else, in the background: society is the ruin because it reverberates the sound of the world, its incessant devouring whirr.

In storytelling there is something profound that resists the sentence of death, that goes beyond its coercive aspect, that escapes the downward thrust of the knife. Storytelling is a way of moving ahead and looking back, a surging movement in the voice, a perpetual breaking down of borders, a way of circumventing sharp spears.

The ruin of Kasch is the origin of literature. *Soma* is the origin of sweetness.

The Ruin of Kasch is one of the stories of Far-li-mas.

Far-li-mas's stories have the effect of *soma,* they act like the honey of the sacrifice, its fruit. In spreading the honey of the sacrifice, Far-li-mas defeats the blood sacrifice. But that honey ends with him: once the cycle of the stars has been abandoned, there is no more certainty about the *soma.* It is now an erratic gift. After the death of Far-li-mas, Naphta will go to ruin. And his stories will be all that is left to nourish the arid, avid body of history. Nothing is said about a successor to Far-li-mas. That would take us into literature.

“The king of Chou was seated with the prince of Fan.[258] At a certain point the king of Chou’s courtiers announced that the princely state of Fan had been three-times lost. The prince of Fan told the king of Chou: ‘The ruin of my princely state is not enough to destroy its existence.’ If the ruin of Fan was not enough to destroy its existence, nor would the existence of Chou have been enough to preserve that realm. Looking at things in this way, the principality of Fan could not be said to be affected by its ruin any more than the kingdom of Chou could call itself safe.”

Elements of Sacrifice

The purpose of sacrifice is not to atone for guilt, as we read in the textbooks. Sacrifice *is* guilt, the only guilt.

Sacrifice is a guilt that elaborates itself. It transforms murder into a suicide. It transposes murder into the distant prospect of a suicide. So distant as to go back to the beginning. Where we encounter the divine suicide: the creation.

The foundation of sacrifice is this: that each of us is not one, but two. We are not a solid brick, but each of us is the two birds of the *Upaniṣads*, on the same branch of the cosmic tree: one eats while the other watches the one eating. The sacrificial deceit—that sacrificer and victim are two people and not one—is the dazzling, insurmountable revelation about ourselves, about our double eye.

History can be summed up as follows: for a long time men killed other beings, dedicating them to an invisible object; and then, from a certain point, they killed without dedicating this act to anyone. Did they forget? Did they regard this act of homage as pointless? Did they condemn it as repugnant? All of these possibilities had some relevance. Then the simple act of killing remained.

Creation is the body of the first victim. In the act of creation the divinity amputates a part of itself, abandoning it. From then on, all it can do is observe its amputated limb in the hands of necessity.

Quechcotona, in the Nahuatl language, means "to cut off someone's head" and at the same time "to pick an ear of grain with the hand." The perception of the origin of sacrifice is precisely that every *picking* is also a *murder*, that every killing is the separation of a thing from what is connected to it (and, moving step by step, this includes Everything). But life, if it wishes to be perpetuated, demands that something is picked. Sacrifice involves the first uprooting, the first detachment, the original *decisio* (from *caedo*, meaning to kill the sacrificial victim with spilling of blood) in a delicate, highly subtle, immense network that reconnects the hollow of the wound to Everything at the moment the wound is opened. It is possible to pick just an ear of grain, but the supreme increase of power is reached when the picking is also a killing. Instead of a blade of corn, to rip out the beating heart with the "obsidian butterfly" from the torso of a victim lying on his back: by tearing out that web that joins the heart to the rest of the body, around six to seven liters of blood spurt out. It is the surfeit of life, which in this blood alone promises to be everlasting.

The Vedic seers (*ṛṣi*), no less than the Aztec priests, had a supreme sense of precariousness. Every moment of time had to be torn away by force—with the violence, perseverance, precision of the sacrifice—before the sun stopped, before everything was once again lost in Ahi Budhnya, "the serpent that inhabits the depth of the sky," the immense, amorphous darkness on darkness.[259]

The Aztecs were constantly at war, but not out of any wish to conquer. For them, war served above all for obtaining prisoners, who then became sacrificial victims. Twenty thousand a year, on the calculations of some scholars. War was a by-product of sacrifice. When sacrifice was no longer an institution, it withdrew into its subordinate power: war. In August 1914 the entire liturgical apparatus of sacrifice was once again unpacked from the trunks. Bloody images were dusted down and given central place in homes and newspapers. In World War II, it would instead have sufficed to concentrate on one word: *holocaust*.

Experimentation is a sacrifice in which guilt has been expunged. The sacrificial pyramid, where blood has drenched the warm stones of the altar, becomes a vast slaughterhouse that extends horizontally in some nondescript corner of the city.

The slaughterhouses of Chicago, university laboratories, their corridors reeking of dismembered frogs, power plants camouflaged in the desert, are centers for one and the same cult. They distribute power thanks to a violent operation, a decision, where everything is focused on procedures, so that their control capability becomes ever more perfect. Hadn't the Vedic seers already said that "exactness, reality is the sacrifice"?[260] The more perfect the control, the richer the material that can be developed, the greater the power unleashed, the more uncontrollable its outcome.

In technology, the *accursed share*, *the part of the fire*, has become the immense experimental waste, dedicated to the unknown god, who is god of the unknown. And, just as in the sacrifice, it is precisely the part that is irredeemably destroyed that guarantees future life. Only research that goes on in the dark can give adequate nourishment to the process. Nothing is more laughable than disputes over the *limits* of experimental research. As if that which is based on breaking down the limit could map out an enclosure less vast than Everything without thereby negating itself. These are disputes stirred up by foolish and incredulous priests against the stern masters of the cult: as if a Brahmin had dared to question whether the gods demand sacrifice.

A sacrificial act is any act where the person acting contemplates himself as he acts. The victim, the offering, is the one who acts. The sacrificer is the eye that contemplates him. For this reason, any act can be a sacrifice. For this reason, ancient society can be regarded, in the way it operates, as a "perpetual sacrifice," according to the definition of René Guénon, who suggests it as something patently obvious: "Since sacrifice is ritual action par excellence, everything else shares in its nature and is to some extent an integral part of it, so that it necessarily determines the whole overall structure of a traditional society, where everything for that same reason can be regarded as being an actual perpetual sacrifice."[261]

The magnificent edifice of the Vedic sacrifice, this temple of temples, where every brick is a Borobudur of hidden galleries, decorated with bas reliefs invisible from outside, is insufficient to conceal, behind all its relentless affirmations, the place of doubt, a tiny wound in the intact skin of the horse that is to be killed on the altar: the existence of a victim that substitutes the sacrificer (*yajamāna*) himself. The only answer to the divine sacrifice of Prajāpati would be the suicide of the sacrificer. The response, instead, is the killing of a victim. "The victorious Horse went to its immolation, meditating thoughts addressed to the divinity," and someone reassures it: "the axe will do no lasting harm to your body."[262, 263] This concern about the victim's consent is revealing: for it presupposes that such consent might not be given. But it is not a question here of discovering an ancient deceit, which would bring satisfaction to all the agents of Enlightenment, always ready to spot the smallest wrong (and the smallest good). If there are at least two beings present before the sacrificial post—the victim and the one who strangles it with a noose—this is because the substitution has already taken place in the mind. The very act of naming, in the arbitrary decision that allows the cancellation of a thing and its substitution with a sound, contains that primordial murder that the sacrifice exposes and, at the same time, attempts to heal. The fabric continually repaired by correspondences, the meanings attributed each time to the individual syllable, to the individual meter: all is a vast attempt to re-stitch the fabric around that minuscule tear produced by the word, by the mental image that cancels a presence to evoke an absence, by the sign: by all that which substitutes something else, and on which another magnificent edifice will be built, contrary to that of the Vedic sacrifice, which in its constant expansion seems to foresee it, and at the same time tries to conceal it, until the cycle stirs it in its present form, in us, around us.

That nature is measured out by returns, by the breath of time, is evidence of it being a sacrificial object. The world is a part that divinity has detached from itself, leaving it to live according to its own rules, and no longer according to divine arbitrariness. But the invisible cord between the divinity and creation isn't entirely severed: the divinity can always take back its world and act brutally toward it: order can be stamped out, the stars might not return. Hence the sacrifice performed by men: the human offering (that part of life that is not left to live unless reabsorbed in the sky from which it

descended) rises up along this same cord, which is then the column of smoke from the sacred pipe. By yielding part of the world to the divinity, the sacrificer wants the divinity to give him the rest of the world, and no longer to intervene there with its uncontrollable whim. The sacrifice is also trying to gain the divinity's permission to use the world. The first consequence of forgetting sacrifice is that the world will then be used without restraint, without limit, without any part being dedicated to any other. But here, too, the end is superimposed upon the beginning, like a reflection, and therefore seen in reverse. Once the sacrifice has disappeared, the whole world, without realizing it, goes back to being an immense sacrificial laboratory. In a climate of uncertainty over everything, the only proposition that no one would dare put in doubt (since it is seen as obvious) is that the world lives inasmuch as it produces. It is the same obviousness that the *Ṛg Veda* recognized when it stated that the world lives inasmuch as it sacrifices. Just as, in the beginning, the divinity could only sacrifice itself since nothing else existed, so now the world sacrifices itself to itself (under other names), because the divinity has vanished. The unwitting sacrificers now resemble the Sādhyas, those mysterious "gods before the gods," who then fell "since they regarded themselves as being above the sacrifice."[264, 265] But it is also possible to fall by pretending that the sacrifice has been closed away in a room of the Musée de l'Homme.

If industry is a sacrificial laboratory, the prestige value of the New means that any given object is a fragrant residue of the sacrifice. An unknown quantity of material has been burned in order to produce it. The New is that part of the victim that the gods haven't touched at their banquet. The gods devour the precious prototype and leave men with the limitless copies. This is why industry is based on reproducibility. But the film star is a catasterism, raised into the heavens after being devoured by the gods.

Seen from outside, the actions of beings who are not enlightened, even though they obey ritual order, are entirely indistinguishable from those of enlightened beings. They eat, fight, sacrifice, make love—with just the same gestures. The only, invisible, difference is the *detachment* of enlightened beings from the fruit of their action. According to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the action must be performed by everyone, enlightened or not: first, because the action is nevertheless carried out within us at every moment

("Never in fact can anyone remain, even for a single instant, without performing some action; since, even without willing it, each is compelled to act by reason of the qualities [*guṇas*] that constitute nature").[266] Even when we are totally still, our breathing continues: in breath there is sacrifice, in sacrifice there is the world. Second, the action must be performed because obedience to *ṛta*, to order (as sacrificial action), helps to turn the wheel of cosmic articulation ("And so the wheel turns").[267] Those who act without being conscious of the action will also turn the wheel, but in the direction that leads to the undifferentiated: "The worlds would collapse if I do not perform my action.[268] I myself would be the cause of universal confusion and I made these creatures perish." With lucid terror, the Hindu seer could see the threat of a return to the undifferentiated, into which every other threat flows—and at the same time he knew that the necessary action, even if conscious, cannot lead to release, unless that mysterious element of *detachment* is acting in it. The *ṛṣi* gave the highest meaning to action: he stated that without its perpetual support the world could disintegrate in an instant, but at the same time he stated that action is a thing from which one has to separate oneself: through *detachment*.

There is a *path of action* and a *path of consciousness* of action. The latter, which is the Esoteric, presupposes the path of action—which is the Exoteric—as its figurative casing. All gnosis is an emphasis on the path of consciousness of action: the path of thought, of knowledge. The formula that points to this path is that found repeatedly in the *Upaniṣads*: "He who knows thus." A vast, indiscernible distance is then established between someone who acts thus and someone who acts in the same way but is "he who knows thus." Today we are in a situation of forced esotericism, since the way of action has been canceled out, since there is no longer a required action for each moment: all actions can be performed at any moment, there is no longer any awareness of their articulation except insofar as they accumulate in simultaneousness or in an indefinite juxtaposition. Here the esoteric comes up against its greatest risk: the only way of knowing is esoterically, and many people think esoterically *without being conscious of it*: this is the supreme evil, the challenge and the parody of Inversion, the parody within which all gnosis is obliged to move, sometimes even disguising itself as unconsciousness in order to pass unobserved and thus avoid being caught. But at the same time the Esoteric is now tempted by its

remotest, ever latent, experience, which finally surfaces: to take *everything* as support (figurative casing) for knowledge, and no longer just those actions that belonged to the order of the sacrifice, the calendar, the cycle. To take all dispersion, all fragmentation as support. This delicate, vertiginous transition recalls what had happened in the Forest Doctrine, the boldest part of the Vedic texts, where it was suggested that, since everything is a sacrifice, one need not even perform it within the community, but could go into the forest and observe it there as an act that is performed all the same, in every moment, in our physiology, in our breathing, in the same way that everything today could be described as a moment in the cycle of production and consumption.

It is said that sacrifice is the origin of exchange: but exchange is the set in which sacrifice is a subset: and exchange, in turn, is included in another category—substitution—which alone makes it possible: this *stands for* that: the one who *gives* this *takes* that.

Substitution does not originate in the faculty for giving names (and thus substituting them for things) but in that irreducible and all-encompassing faculty for forming mental images; invisible, occasional, impermanent entities, states of consciousness that overlap with what is perceived—or that even substitute it, canceling it. Here we are present at the original bifurcation of the mind; here the two birds of the *Upaniṣads* come down from the sky to perch on the same branch—the bird that eats and the one that is constantly *compelled* to perceive (nourish itself), receiving stimuli. The other, the bird that watches it, is superimposing its own gaze on the gaze that the other bird is directing at the world.

Every act can be seen as a sacrifice if the process of giving and taking—the metabolism inscribed in every gesture—is found within it. Sacrifice, then, is every act leading to the consciousness of such a process.

THE SENATOR FROM ST. PETERSBURG: You arrogant orphans of ritual, and ultimately of ceremony: haven't you realized you find yourselves in the situation most deceptively close to the beginning? Mental sacrifice—the only one you could know—was the esoteric image of that slaughterhouse that was assembled on the altar of offerings. You need no longer see Prajāpati dismembered and emptied over all the regions of

> the world; nor the nameless man, from whom to tear the single heart; nor the animal that peers at you with eyes almost human, waiting for the knife; nor even the plant that is liquid fire. Silent, motionless, engrossed, you can proceed to that invisible act from which all else follows, that offering of self to Self, which alone still softens the turning of the wheel. And nothing then prevents you from continuing in society, like the Neva that continues to flow behind us as we speak. You well know, of course, that the waters from above do not respond to the fire of the sacrifice, you have given up that Vedic arithmetic that allowed you to follow the course of the cosmic game. And yet, if you do not carry on sacrificing, ignorant of everything and perhaps of yourselves, your thought will be that of the meek rabble that relentlessly pour out the rosary of opinions. An even more mysterious constraint will clutch you at the throat and will drive you to identify yourselves with things that, in the end, are unimportant: for example, you yourselves. Even when you're alone, a crowd of voices will haunt you, like at the Café du Commerce. And very few of you will rise even to the insolence of the libertine, accustomed to exchanging thoughts for flimsy jabots. Obeying a despot you have never seen, you will end up realizing that living is too costly.

The most shameless metaphors are those that once fixed the poles in world order. Woman-cow, man-bull are evidence of this, as well as disdain for the civilization of the goddess. Industry does not seek to cancel out tradition, as a reactionary theory claims; on the contrary, it brings it to fulfillment, in a traffic of archetypes. To this end it hides the foundation of tradition, the sense of the continual attack on order, that rituals were meant to heal thanks to an uninterrupted exchange, where what had just been the subject of wrongful and inevitable appropriation was given in offering. The sacrificial exchange is contradictory because it denies the very principle of exchange, the unit of measure, which is not given in common to human language and the elements of nature. Myth established the impossible symbolic system that had to allow exchange. Thanks to this impossibility, exchange was saved from the guilt that taints its origin. Since what kitsch reveals is not just the cutting off of natural relationships: it is the curse that transforms the primal moment of violation—when relationships were given a name—into a perpetual nightmare. Ignorance of this guilt is the

foundation of industry: what exists is therefore a chain of messages, equal by right, convergent in meaning, varied in form. But there are no people who exchange them, nor anything that proposes them. This can be an image of the Word. Industry therefore has to be thanked: knowledge can only come *per speculum in aenigmate*, through a glass darkly.

CHEVALIER DE B***: During my adolescent years, as I was passing through what you call the "storms of the revolution" in my country, I believe I established one thing above all: I now know that our greatest and certainly our wiliest enemy is society, the very idea of it. At one time it was happy to represent itself as a large body, a giant troubled by occasional torments. Today it has engulfed the subterranean and celestial seas, from the Yellow Springs to Eridanus, it has incorporated stars and magma, it has amalgamated all that exists within itself. The primordial giant, the Great Animal that Plato had already dreamed of, will seem like miniature Sèvres carafes in front of the enormous glass bubble into which society has put the world: everything is a seedling in its greenhouse.

The foundation of inversion: society is able to absorb within it all divine as well as natural images: all that which stood *in front of* society, from which society was detached, with which it negotiated at every moment of its life: the triple hub that connects the wheel of the articulated to the threefold *pada*, from which the unarticulated descends, from which it depends, to which it returns. Transitions: Durkheim's formula—"the religious is the social"—is the sign that this engulfing society already exists, indeed it is clear to see, so that it can be presented as a scientific hypothesis. With Simone Weil there is the first revolt against this secular form of religion—a revulsion emerges along the same lines as that of Lucretius for the "copious blood of quadrupeds sprinkled over altars."[269] With Simone Weil there is the first recognition of the most insidious peculiarity of society: the "mystery" through which there exists "an apparent kinship between social and supernatural": this is the first statement that, as a consequence, the *only* idolatry is now that which bows to society, the only enslavement is "enslavement to society."[270, 271]

Thus on greeting the Buddha: “Seashell? milk? moon? jasmine? crystal? snowflake? linen cloth? pale cloud? oh whiteness! oh roar of laughter! a row of sunshades rise to the clouds! his adorable parasols light up the world; three tens of gods, wondrous birds, Blessed, cantors of paradise take pleasure in it.[272] Bow down to adore him ceaselessly, the Buddha, kinsman of the Sun!” When the Buddha persuaded the five monks, his first followers, that he was the awakened one, he immediately compared himself with “a wild deer who lives in the forest and roams its slopes; confidently it walks, stands or lies down, confidently it rests: it is out of the trapper’s reach.”[273] The first image of release given to the Buddha is that of the victim who has escaped from the sacrifice, of the prey escaped from the hunter.

The passage from the Vedic world to the Buddha is a passage from hunger to thirst: for the *ṛṣis* (seers) “in the beginning everything was cloaked by death, as hunger is death”; for the Buddha, in his discourse at Benares, all that has to be avoided is “thirst.”[274] Hunger belongs to the metaphysics of sacrifice, it is the hub around which it revolves; thirst belongs to the metaphysics of the forest, which has escaped the sacrifice but discovers that this is not enough to escape desire. The Buddha discovers that desire is not necessarily linked to killing—or rather, that the killing continues even in the most inoffensive act. His discovery continues, and almost impiously reveals, what the Brahmin turned *saṃnyāsin* (renouncer) had already revealed. Having withdrawn into the forest, far from the sacrificial post, the *saṃnyāsin* had discovered it is not enough to free oneself from sacrificial action: every instant of life is an act, and behind each act there is a desire, in the same way that behind the sacrifice there is the desire for the fruit of the sacrifice. Now, with the Buddha, the *karman* (action) is no longer primarily a sacrificial act, but a bare action of whatever kind. The idea that all resounds in Universal Interdependence, the Vedic string of identifications—this is that, which is that, which is this—is suddenly silent. Now the names of various interwoven threads appear unimportant, fortuitous, short-lived. All that matters is their single constant characteristic—of being constricting woven threads. This is *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination): the all-enveloping net of the sacrifice, but no longer resonant with harmonics. When touched, it emits a hollow sound, it no longer signals the sympathy between its parts, but only

its own immense existence. For the *ṛṣis,* the interdependence of everything was won, was constructed, with the sacrifice; for the Buddha, interdependence has existed forever and is insignificant: why celebrate it, why help still to weave it, if all that's required is to meticulously unpick it, thread by thread, with the same precision as the Vedic seers in the opposite action, in order to slip through the mesh of the net?

The relationship of science with the unknown resumes and modulates the relationship of the Vedic Brahmins with their many gods. The existence of the unknown demands a continual, huge dissipation of energy, of life. And the benefit of this sacrificial work, from which every *opus* derives, is the occasional discovery, a gift granted by the unknown to its priests. And, just as the Vedic gods feared that, through sacrifice, the priests would indeed become immortal, following the path of the gods themselves, who in the beginning had also become immortal through sacrificing, likewise the unknown can fear that such a profusion of offerings is not a repeated gesture of homage but the prelude to some act of overcoming. And yet science, as well as being eager and astute, is also modest and shortsighted—and this reassures the gods who now hide behind the unknown as if it were the acronym of an association. Science wants only one kind of gift: it wants facts that are verifiable, controllable, and repeatable. And, during their long history, the gods hidden in the unknown know that the most valuable gifts do not belong to that category: happiness, above all, is unverifiable, uncontrollable and unrepeatable. Prometheus's fatal trick is once again played out: men make sure they get the fat part of the offering, that core of energy that nevertheless brings hunger and death. The gods agree to be deceived, with a slight hint of sarcasm: they will have only the smoke of the sacrifice, those uncontrollable aromas, scattered in the air, which are nevertheless pure pleasure and do not bring hunger and death.

The renouncer (*saṃnyāsin*) seeks release (*mokṣa*) from the world: the gnostic condemns the elements of the world (*stoicheīa toū kósmou*): the libertine uses the world open-mindedly: anonymous technology uses the world as its material. The renouncer is an orthodox: the gnostic is a heretic: the libertine an atheist: anonymous technology believes in itself. An illegitimate lineage that runs the world.

The whole history of modern philosophy is deeply troubled by sacrifice, by its terrible truth: Hegel's dialectics is a transcription, an adulterated translation of sacrifice; Schopenhauer is the Western *saṃnyāsin*, the renouncer, and always therefore associated with sacrifice; Abraham is the sacrifice around which Kierkegaard's thought revolves; and Dionysus (and the Crucified, with which he signs two "letters of insanity" on January 4, 1889, in Turin) is Nietzsche's sacrifice. Yet sacrifice is absent from the epistemological line that comes down from Kant to the Vienna circle by way of the formalization of systems: but here knowledge is assumed to be a prosthesis, to be offered to science: it fails to admit that this prosthesis will then be offered by science to technology, so that technology can sacrifice under the name of experiment, and the sacrifice is ultimately multiplied in production.

There's a wisdom of the officiant and there's a wisdom of the victim. The two gradually draw apart in history. From the wisdom of the officiant comes the sovereignty of the subject who builds the edifice of knowledge for himself. From the wisdom of the victim come the three words of Aeschylus, "*tō páthei máthos*," "learning through suffering," which allude to the passion for initiatory knowledge.[275] The scandal of Christ is that he was priest and victim at the same time, as in the beginning, joining the two paths together in him.

When Descartes speaks about the *negligible*, we know that this is the *victim*: the part cut away from order, condemned now not to exist, killed without being given. Simone Weil wrote: "… the notion of negligible marks the transition from finite to infinite."[276]

The roar of applause covers the cries of the victim. When the celebrity or the politician is murdered for being "too famous," the assassin is described as mad. But his madness reveals the origin of the applause.

The thorn of the sacrifice is the choice of the victim. The Vedic network of correspondences embraces everything and connects everything with everything: countless texts repeat that the officiant *is* the victim, just as the bricks of the altar are intense thought. But at the end of the ceremony, the officiant returns home, while the victim remains dead on the altar. That which is killed in the victim is irreplaceable, unique: that fading singularity

that slips through the mesh of correspondences, that small wrinkle around the eyes of the Tollund Man, hanged thousands of years ago and preserved intact in the blue clay of Denmark. Iphigenia, offered as a sacrifice in Aulis (a fresco at Pompey shows her being dragged to the altar, her breasts exposed and arms raised heavenward, the knife of the sacrifice already visible above her), ends up as a priestess in Tauris: in the myth, the victim who has a name becomes wrapped by the divinity in a cloud of euphemism to heal the incurable wound. Here, too, the immense lucidity of the myth is apparent: the knowledge that no theology, no *connexio* can ever heal the killing. With those victims who become stars in the sky, or those whom the gods carry off to heaven or save at the last moment, myth gives way to fairy tale, as in its beginning and its end: *once upon a time* is followed, all of a sudden, by *and they all lived happily ever after*. When no god carries it up into his cloud, that single body is left slaughtered on the altar, unmentioned but implicit, and discernible in the crystalline air of exemplary gestures.

The theory of sacrifice makes all repeatable and reversible acts—breathing, lovemaking, music—revolve around two irreversible acts: eating and killing. These are the two acts in which the arrow of time inflicts a wound that never heals. Around that wound, the cosmic curtain now rises, the vast fabric that connects everything with everything, that repeats everything in everything. But its secret is that small rip at its center: the open wound in the victim, life with no palpable return. The perception of the irreversibility of time, which in the ancient world is the esoteric of the esoteric, the secret of the secret, the ultimate *tremendum*, becomes most obvious and widespread in the new world. Once again the world without gods turns out to be the world of compulsory esotericism.

Law and Order

It is significant that we talk about law *and* order—it's not enough to say just "law" or just "order." Indeed, order does not repeat, does not embody,

the sense of law. Order is what law cannot achieve alone. Order is law plus sacrifice, the perpetual surplus, the perpetual extra that has to be destroyed for order to exist. The world cannot live with law alone: it requires an order that law, by itself, is incapable of giving. The world needs to destroy something to make order: and it must destroy it outside the law—in pleasure, in hatred, in indifference.

The modern age is based on the shortsighted assumption that *law* and *order* are synonyms, that we talk about "law and order" as a high-sounding pleonasm that conjures deeper respect. Destruction gathers its force in darkness, concentrates itself, adjusts itself, in proportion to the law that would seek to deny it, and it does so for the very reason that it no longer has a recognized existence. The vaster and more diversified the law, the more devastating the destruction that eludes it. Every war breaks out to establish the order that law could never establish. The Marxist idea of revolution acknowledges this impotence of the law and at the same time it seizes the entire apparatus of sacrifice, exploiting it to establish an order that denies the foundation of sacrifice.

The impotence of the law stems from its incapacity to deal with surplus. Law presupposes a single undivided subject, sacrifice presupposes a dual subject: the sacrificer and the victim. And the surplus is the victim. Therefore, law is always the exoteric of the sacrifice.

Surplus value, the modern name for the *accursed share*, and the starting point for the Marxist attack on capital, becomes the object of a dispute that can only be resolved by revolutionary violence, once it is recognized that the law is unable to deal with surplus. Surplus value is the object of the sacrifice, which a new priestly sect wants to manage in a new way. But Marxist priests—like the haruspices of ancient Rome—agree with their enemies in denying that the dispute is about the object of the sacrifice. They talk about private and public ownership, about fair distribution of resources. They deny that surplus, before belonging to the oppressors and the oppressed, belongs to nature, the modern name for the Other.

Surplus is the excess of nature over culture, that part of nature that culture finds itself having to gamble with, consume, destroy, dedicate. In dealing with such excess, every culture defines its own physiognomy. Law

tends toward monotony; its variations are scant in comparison with the sumptuous variety of forms. And the forms are the gamut of sacrificial games.

Sacrifice is inscribed in our physiology: any order—biological and social—is founded on an expulsion, on a quantity of burned-up energy, because order has to be smaller than the material that it orders. The only order without visible expulsion would be analogous to that of plant life: a culture that manages to subsist without founding itself on difference, and therefore without founding itself: a culture indistinguishable from the rustling of a tree.

Every sacrifice is the recognition of an Other. The West, after all its acts of emancipation, can recognize nothing other than itself. Its paralysis, hidden behind the mass of standard procedures, follows from no longer knowing to whom to give itself. The gods have fallen, but the hypostases have not: so the world ends up following that awkward, sinister march that Max Stirner had described: for Reason, for Liberty, for Humanity, for the Cause. But awakening from such hypostases is bitter, more so than from any other superstition.

The *Upaniṣads* require the destruction to be carried out at the moment of maximum consciousness. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Arjuna receives the revelation from Kṛṣṇa at the moment when he is about to kill his kinsmen on the battlefield. The secular world turns its eyes away from destruction. And it keeps destruction out of sight, like the bombed city kept away from the eyes of the pilot who drops the bomb—and is already flying far away.

Porphyry is the perfect Western *saṃnyāsin*. He is familiar with sacrifice, its secrets, its unspeakableness. But he is gripped by a sort of nausea in front of "the impurity that comes from flesh and blood," in front of the vapors of immolated souls.[277] The world, for him, is "sorcery" (*goēteuma*), a potion that dulls the mind.[278] He has only one desire: to wake up, and to remain in wakefulness, to break the bonds of the sorceress, to become an apostate from the world, therefore to detach himself from it, since "detachment" is *apóstasis*.

"Detachment can be achieved with violence … But, for example with sentient things, an object snatched away with violence carries with it some

part or trace of that from which it has been detached."[279] Clean detachment, without residue, is achieved however by constantly averting the mind from the impure objects, which is reminiscent of uninterrupted prayer. Porphyry is speaking here as an observer of the psyche, using words that have an affinity with those of the great Buddhist masters and with the hermits of the Thebaid—similar to the exchanges of correspondence between seventeenth-century scientists. But he chooses a wonderfully urbane path of detachment, a pool of silence in the metropolis, an existence recognizable from the outside by no indication other than sobriety and clarity. He performs only a "sacrifice of thought" (*noerà thysía*), presenting himself to the god "in a white garment and with a pure impassive soul and a light body, not burdened by essences or passions of the soul taken from other beings."[280, 281] In the pagan twilight, Porphyry is a man who is tired of ritual, fumigations, spells, not because he questions their power, but precisely because he is familiar with such power—and he knows that it would bind him even more to the demons of the world. Like the *saṃnyāsin* in the forest, Porphyry hides away in the imperial city. "We who each day train ourselves to die to others," he writes, using the verb *apothnēskein* with the dative, in a construction unknown to his teachers, but which we find in Paul ("dead to the law," "dead to sin"), who was the most philosophical of the Jews, in whom Porphyry recognized a "lineage of philosophers."[282, 283, 284, 285]

The gods whom Porphyry worships look more to the "conduct of the sacrificers than the abundance of the things sacrificed."[286] As for the object of the sacrifice, for them "the most excellent offering is a pure intellect and an impassive soul."[287] Here, as already in India, the sacrifice tends to withdraw into the invisible. No external signs make it possible to know what is happening in the sacrificer, apart from a small gesture that Porphyry compares with those required by good manners: "The honors that we reserve for the gods should be likened to those that are rendered to good men when we stand to allow them to sit in the best places, and should not be likened to the payment of taxes."[288] This reference to good manners toward the gods is the last, sublime pagan message.

Sacrifice creates the strongest link between society and what lies outside it. But the sacred margin of contact with the outside world—the geometric locus where the sacrifice takes place—also permits the existence of an internal, profane area *in pectore*, which can now grow without being

threatened at any moment by the sacred. In the destruction—even only of herbs—the guilt on which culture is established is affirmed: its detachment, its isolation from everything else, insofar as it isolates a thing-victim and expels it. By dedicating the victim to something other than itself, society recognizes its own dependence upon that from which it has detached itself. And at the same time it holds the outside world at a distance, offering it the victim rather than itself. This is the act of reverence. This is the cunning trick of enlightenment. At first, they are inseparable. The ploy is wrapped in reverence, and it works as a slow corrosive, like the poison (German: *Gift*) in the gift. As a *Gift*-gift.

In Guénon's formulation, the sacrifice reflects (and therefore inverts) the *solve et coagula* of origin: that which was divided in the creation is now joined back together. "The essential purpose of sacrifice is to 'unite that which has been separated,' therefore—so far as man is concerned—to reunite 'I' to the 'Self.' "[289] Hence the *coniunctio*, the hierogamy, which is interwoven with the acts of the sacrifice: the ritual foundation of interweaving Eros and Thanatos. Hence the smell of slaughter that is the aura of sex. But how can an act of violent expulsion and destruction be an act of reunion, of restitution? In killing the victim, culture violently detaches itself from the thing, it severs a tie that binds it to the whole. But, by dedicating the victim to the divinity, culture rejoins the thing destroyed —as a representative of culture itself—to the whole. Here, in this pendular movement, lies the double aspect of sacrifice. And the difference is determined by the point at which the movement is halted: whether at the center within society or the center outside it. In the Vedic texts, the answer is clear: the center into which the sacrifice flows lies outside society. The sacrificial vessel sets out from the formless and profane existence of the *yajamāna* (the "sacrificer"), who is the patron and beneficiary of the ceremony; during the ritual actions it sails through the treacherous waters and currents of the sacred, which is *made* there; finally it delivers the victim to the divine ocean, which reabsorbs him, in the same way that *ātman* absorbs *jīvātman*, in the same way that the Self absorbs the I. Then the sacrificer returns to his life. A murderous eros, an amorous killing, the archetype of every journey.

Porphyry, in *De abstinentia*, discusses whether or not *nómos* (law) extends to animals. *Nómos* does not, in fact, extend to the whole of nature, but is founded on a separation between one sphere where it rules (society) and one sphere abandoned to whim (animals, along with nature). Law cannot therefore support universal interdependence: its application involves the severing of links that the law itself does not set down. Where the law has not spoken, chance rules. Chance means anything whatsoever. Where the law has not spoken, anything whatsoever can rule.

The law falls silent when it reaches the lavish margin of society, its superabundance: it is the area where animals are killed, silently, unmentioned by the law. It is the sacrificial band that girds society, its infula.

From the Laws of Manu: "The householder has five instruments of murder: the hearth, the pestle, the broom, the mortar, and the water jug.[290] In order to atone for all these offenses, the great sages have established five great sacrifices that the householder must perform every year. The teaching [of the *Vedas*] is the sacrifice to *brahman*, the offering of food and water is the sacrifice to the ancestors, the offering [of food] in the air and on the ground is the sacrifice to the ghosts. As for the offering to men, this is hospitality. He who never fails, so far as possible, to perform these five great sacrifices, even if he remains inside his house, is not tainted by the sin of murder." The delicacy of the Vedic sages: the five murder weapons are household items: the broom, the water jug. This is to show that murder involves the simplest, everyday, unconscious acts. A room is swept, and a victim is strangled: the *connexio* makes one act resonate with the other.

That we are made of *ātman* and *jīvātman*, of a "Self" and an "I" (following Guénon's translation), which are coexistent and mutually dependent, was a truth once again perceived in the Western hermetic tradition—every alchemical *operari* implies it—and eventually in German romanticism, in the interplay of Doubles. But the official course of philosophy, that sequence from Locke to Hume to Kant that we find in the textbooks, had always sought to erase any duality from the mind and tended to reduce each individual to a position of central command, whose reliability had yet to be established. The task of patiently inspecting the joints, undertaken by Kant, finally led to those joints being smashed apart

by Nietzsche and his hammer. Instead of the individual there was now a yawning cavity. Crossing it, like the backs of dolphins, were dark beings, momentary impulses. Meanwhile, science agreed to transform itself once and for all into a prosthesis, a device to be attached during laboratory hours to a subject who, otherwise, acted as a good citizen of the realm of Public Opinion. And yet, within that same strict epistemological plan, devoted to Ockham and to the eradication of all superfluity, the original duality of the subject would once again emerge: in the last years of the nineteenth century, when discussion began about the paradoxes of set theory, another line started to emerge, which would lead to Gödel, and from there would branch out in every direction: a sign of a final corruption, of a now proven inadequacy of every discourse that did not include discourse about itself. And it was precisely here, in the duality between a discourse that has a referent and one that has itself as a referent, that the two birds of the *Upaniṣads* reappeared, the *ātman* and the *jīvātman*—and at the very center of science, as at the center of Vedic ritual, once again there was the exchange of looks between the two birds, perched on the same branch on the vast tree of life.

The eternal return shifts the cycle beyond the Zodiac; a vision tinged with anguish, in the perception of the colossal numbers that now invade the empty spaces between the stars. Auguste Blanqui imprisoned at Clairvaux: "At night, clinging to the bars of his cell, he conversed with the stars."[291] Impossible experience of full pure unrelated fragmentation. Now the ring, which was decorated with the beasts of the Zodiac, expands immeasurably and is encrusted with cosmic dust.

"A lowering of the head"—the final gesture in the face of life's adversities, according to the oracle, was the gesture that the sheep had to make before being sacrificed: "You are forbidden to slay the sturdy race of sheep, O Theopropides.[292] But if the animal agrees by lowering its head to the purifying water, I say, O Episcopus, that it is right to sacrifice it."

Ahnungslos, "unperceiving": this wonderful German word indicates the condition into which history has tortuously led the West. To be born "unperceiving," with no traces of guilt or grace, is the original modern status, that forlorn claim to free oneself from the world that lurks hidden

behind the bench of a workshop or laboratory, behind a school desk or a bank counter. At its origin, as always, lies a detail of sacrificial practice. “If one consecrates, it is to desecrate better,” the Ancestors said. The world weighed horribly upon everything, everything had too much meaning, every tiny object contained too much power. An undeclared dream began to take shape: that the finest thing was to become lighter, to rid oneself of the world. To do so, one had to concentrate the sacred in a victim—and kill it. After, all that was left was to return to heady banality, profane at last. The possibility of letting one’s thinking become empty, arbitrary, and wandering was the only Siren the pure Westerner has obeyed. All the others he has deceived—and not even with too much effort.

In the tangled web of sacrifice, the Westerner chose one single thread—that of expelling the sacred through the killing of the sacrificial victim—and he sought to separate it from all the others. He felt no great regret about no longer eating the sacred, in absorbing a tolerable part of the source of all power, of the inexhaustible *soma*. Home cooking was enough for him—or, at most, a banquet among friends, spiced with the gossip of some courtesans. But there remained something dark and disturbing about those sacrificial practices: the impurity, prior to concentrating itself entirely on the victim, was in the subject himself, in the sacrificer—and it was weighing down his life, which tried now to be simply transparent and cruel. At the end of a long, dark process, sacrifice was transformed into judicial trial. With the advent of law, guilt, which belongs to the sacrifice, and primarily to the sacrificer, is shifted at the outset onto the victim alone: he will no longer be called the victim, but the culprit. The law severs the connection between guilt and the process of life (“la vie étant coupable,” life being guilty, as Joseph de Maistre would one day say): in the judicial process, guilt is extraneous to the law—it waits only to be stabbed by the law.[293] Between *Oedipus Rex* and the Gospels, sacrifice has completed its transformation into a trial. It is now for the law to establish the choice of victim. But the only trial that is wholly effective, insofar as it frees itself from the sacred, is the trial in which the innocent is convicted. Here it is shown how the law has always been, and will always be, overwhelmed by something previous and more powerful. Pilate washes his hands, since he realizes that the law is powerless to absolve. Christ is not condemned by the

law, but by the impotence of the law. Those who condemn him are the crowd, together with its priests.

The sacred is concentrated in the victim, it is canceled out in the victim, and it emanates from the victim. The sacred must however be killed, since it terrifies: its everlasting contagion makes life impossible. The only other possibility—the modern invention—is where the sacred is not perceived. The sacred is either terrifying or it goes unnoticed. But the situation in which it goes unnoticed produces once again, in reverse, the situation of primal terror. Something common, ubiquitous, that drives people to kill with little or no reason, to inflict ruthless tortures, on themselves, on anyone.

The peculiarly modern form of sacrifice is a vast industrial undertaking that shuns the name and memory of sacrifice. There is talk of whole classes to be eliminated, or otherwise of those inevitable dropouts who each day are cast out of the social mechanism. But they are always events strictly belonging to society. Likewise people still anoint divine beings, arrange them on furs, gird them with flowers and white bands, before an invisible knife crashes down upon them. Astral archons appearing as young women arrested while stealing from department stores or choked by barbiturates.

For Vedic India, I and Self, *jīvātman* and *ātman*, were like the sacrificial post (*yūpa*) and the victim that was tied to it. "Closer to you than your jugular vein," says the god to the mystic, since he is the knife that has severed that vein.

Nature is a haunted house—but
Art—a House that tries to be haunted.
Emily

"Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth."[294] Art, which is elusive by its very nature, can only be given a genetic definition—and this one by Theodor Adorno is perhaps the most beautiful. To ignore the magical compulsions that sacrifice demands is not just a stratagem of reason, which rids itself of the powers. It is also a gesture that opens up an entirely new dimension—it provides the opportunity to play with sacrificial objects, with the flotsam and jetsam that the world of magic has abandoned on the shores

of the psyche. All the characteristics of art, from its pervasive ambiguity to its cathartic purpose as revealed by the naturalist Aristotle, to its "disinterestedness" as formulated by Kant, are remnants of sacrifice. Beckett's "dire cela, sans savoir quoi," "say it, not knowing what," resounds with the original *operari* that was the sacrifice itself. Whereas the "sans savoir quoi" evokes the powers that have been canceled out, which operate anonymously, in obscurity. This is the peculiarity of the West: not that it has discovered Beauty, but that it has let it slip into a state of suspension, it has slackened the noose around the victim's neck. Escaping from the "lie of being truth" also means escaping from truth itself, from its suffocation. This leads to the implacable hostility of art to every social order, which incorporates each time a claim to truth. In art, the voice that speaks is that of the victim who has escaped *in extremis*, and forever, from being killed, when ritual had already let everything sacred flow back into that killing. Art has a light step because it roams in the forest. Now the altar is empty.

In a totally secular society, such as France at the end of the nineteenth century, with its pompous *instituteurs* of free thinking, eager to demolish Gothic chapels and establish secular morality, the insight of Émile Durkheim was inevitable: that the religious is the social. No one before him, or in any other place, could have formulated with that peremptory sternness, with that École Normale zest, an axiom that implies the total reabsorption of the cloud of divinity into the Great Animal of Plato and Simone Weil. Durkheim came from a family of rabbis—he is a dry Jew, who never went back into the water after the crossing of the Red Sea. The sea, for him, does not exist—society has absorbed it. On the other hand, the brightest anthropologists of his school, Marcel Mauss and Marcel Granet, were wonderfully damp. The "total social facts" they described, sometimes with visionary precision, were the first proper portrayals of ancient societies as places in which cosmic exchanges took place. "Alors que tout est en nuances …," "Everything being a question of nuances …," was the secret motto of Mauss—and of Granet. While J. G. Frazer, in another *cabinet* on the other side of the English Channel, was clothing human origins with a grand series of "ready-made suits" (Dumézil), Mauss was weighing every detail of the etiquette of people he would never see with the same obsessive and insatiable eye that Saint-Simon had for court etiquette.

The conclusions eventually reached by Mauss and Granet go contrary to those put forward by Durkheim. But Durkheim's axiom—"the religious is the social"—is one of those false principles that reveal a looming truth. Only another kind of genius, that of René Girard, would succeed in pushing the analysis as far as the savage end that Durkheim had not foreseen in his axiom. Girard is one of the last surviving "hedgehogs," to use the term that Isaiah Berlin had subtly drawn from the verse of Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." The "one big thing" that Girard knows has a name: scapegoat. For Girard, all theological speculations about sacrifice, that whole part of the sacrificial conundrum that does not lead straight to the scapegoat, are priestly attempts to hide the terrible truth. Thus he accepts, though with heroic intelligence, the West's meanest game—that of "demystifying," "demythifying," "demasking," before being initiated into the mystery of the mask. But if his sarcasm and his fury do no harm to the Vedic sages, they reach modern anthropologists with appropriate vehemence. It is not the Vedas that are unmasked here, but the euphemistic corporate circumlocutions used by science to cover up continual murder, perpetual bloodshed. Anthropologists have become devoted to social functionality and seem more and more to display a prudery akin to those Victorians who did all they could to avoid any reference to feet and legs. Girard repeatedly hurls at them "Molière's immortal words: 'Ah! in what gallant terms these things are put.' "[295]

Girard aspires not so much to the rigor of the sociological workshop as to the evangelical text. All of his work can be read as a dazzling commentary on the works of Caiaphas: "Expedit vobis ut unus moriatur homo pro populo, et non tota gens pereat" ("It is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, and not the whole nation be destroyed").[296] Caiaphas here is the politician: "no one has done better than he in politics."[297] And his lucidity points to the unspoken foundation that we come across in every society: "This is the terrible paradox of desires in men.[298] They can never agree on the preservation of their object; but they can always agree on its destruction; they never reach agreement with each other except at the expense of a victim." This mechanism, for Girard, is *the* mechanism of sacrifice: but, strangely, it is never so obvious as in modern society, which has so proudly distanced itself from sacrifice. To find a perfect "persecutory text," Girard has to refer to a passage against the Jews in Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement du Roi de Navarre*. This is to be

explained, according to Girard, with the progressive action of evangelical truth against sacrifice, which first allows the horrible reality of the scapegoat to emerge, and finally ensures that it is generally condemned over the course of time, as anti-Semitism is today. In this tortuous Enlightenment vision, however, Girard's main weaknesses become apparent: persecution has never, in fact, become so widespread as in the modern West, which ignores sacrifice and regards it as a superstition. The expulsion of the sacred, which belongs to the sacrifice, now becomes spring-cleaning, physiological evacuation. The Jews are foul insects that have to be swept out from healthy Germanic living rooms. People talk about Stalin's "purges": millions of alleged opponents are sent off to labor camps. The fact that the *communis opinio* condemns anti-Semitism and persecution in general is a derisive corollary of the fact that persecution itself—for every kind of reason: race, public order, religion, terrorism—has become the lingua franca of world politics. If the truth about sacrifice is able to describe the extermination of the Jews as a "holocaust" without even recognizing that the word is a technical term of Jewish sacrifice, then that truth resembles anti-Christian parody rather than the word of Christ. And yet Girard's hypothesis touches upon a truth that no anthropologist has ever considered; it touches the open wound of sacrifice, it poses the most critical and ever-elusive question: "Who will sacrifice whom?" We know from Sahagún, from the oracle of Delphi, and from Baudelaire, that in the perfect sacrifice "there must be consent and joy on the part of the victim."[299, 300] But we cannot fail to notice the Tyrrhenian amphora that depicts the sacrifice of Polyxena. The young girl is stretched like a rolled-up carpet and held under the arms of three warriors, who are holding her respectively at the height of her ankles, knees, and chest. Dressed in helmets and greaves, all three are seen in sharp profile. Neoptolemus, also wearing a helmet and greaves, plunges a large blade into Polyxena's throat with his right hand, while he clasps her head with his left, so as to lift her head and better expose her throat. Her blood spurts onto the altar. Diomedes watches from behind Neoptolemus, holding a lance. Another figure looks away.

No theological speculation can blot out this scene. And this scene is not enough to blot out theological speculation, as Girard would like to do. On this, as often happens for the ultimate things, almost everything is said in a story by Chuang-tzu: "The priest of the sacrifice approached the fence in his ceremonial dress and spoke to the pigs as follows: 'Why do you detest

being taken to your death? I will fatten you up for three months; as for me, for ten days I will mortify myself and for three days I will fast.[301] Then white grass mats will be rolled out for you and your limbs will be laid on carved trays. What more do you want?' Then he thought what the pigs would have preferred and he said: 'They prefer to be fed on husks and bran and to remain in their sty.' "

Girard traces back, as far as its origins, the delirium that Western man first unleashes and then, with a credulous shudder, takes as being true: the autonomy of society, its claim to relate only to itself, to express everything in relation to itself—and therefore also to consider the victims sacrificed to the stars as mere sops for the stability of the group. For Girard, it is as though the sun, the moon, fire, plague, and wind existed only as a way of covering up some kind of social tension. This odd claim is the same as in Marx, who suggested that the water from the waterfall "has no value" since it is not produced by labor.[302] That assumption, that nothing existed before being *put into place* by the whim of thought, is the awkward, imperious *Setzen* of the mind. Happily, the world is not like this. And Girard carries out a violent extrapolation to get to the heart of the violence: its victim is silent nonhuman reality. But there is a sense, however, in which the world was like this: the sense in which that claim about society's sovereign isolation, which would not be declared for several thousand years, appears to have existed, in latent form, from the very beginning. Girard assumes that in the beginning there was not death, but a murder—and more precisely, a lynching. But, before the lynching, there is hunger: "for hunger is death."[303] Death and murder are joined together in hunger. The impossibility of survival without eating, therefore without killing—since even cutting down a plant means killing—is the sentence delivered by Zeus in response to Prometheus's sacrificial deceit: the gods, having been tricked, will have only the "white bones" and the smoke from the meat, while the humans, in *choosing* the succulent meat, will inherit hunger, and therefore death.[304] This primordial event is the foundation of sacrifice, the inescapable *ṛta*. In offering the sacrifice, we accept—though behind the trick of substitution, which keeps us temporarily alive—that one day we will be devoured, if not by humans then by those gods who are the invisible guests at the banquet: "killing always means killed oneself."[305] This perfect superimposition of sacrifice onto a cosmic physiology is seen by Girard as a

mere deceit, for he is not prepared to turn his attention away from social physiology for a single moment—and therefore he does not perceive the power of social physiology as so overwhelming, above all because it gradually appropriates the cosmic physiology until it entirely absorbs it within itself. But Girard's passionate bias is most valuable: it reminds us that, from the beginning, sacrifice has also helped society to cast off the sacred, which would otherwise have paralyzed it. Following this single thread, we move smoothly from prehistory to today—and this might give the false impression that the key to the enigma, the missing building block, has been found. In fact, this only explains the sacrificial stratagem, the small shiny stone set in the throat of the *t'ao t'ieh*, the composite beast of the origins. From there, in a logical sequence, we head toward that day when it was thought that the danger of the sacred was no longer so deadly. There was a time when the consul Paulus Aemilius, with transparent Roman cynicism, stated that sacrifice was no longer needed to increase the fortunes of the Republic. It was now enough for these fortunes to remain unchanged, just as they were. The Romans themselves would take care to increase them. After this, all that remained was to forget the sacrifice. Everything, with time, becomes superstition—and thus, as Baudelaire wrote, "the depository of all truths."[306]

Girard applies Durkheim's axiom strictly (perhaps he is the first to do so), which he describes as "the greatest anthropological intuition of our time."[307] Indeed, the cloud of religion shrouds the social nexus in its crucial points: but for Girard it is as though the cloud had emerged from those points. Certain elementary factors—the irreversibility of time, death, hunger, desirability—therefore remain untouched by that violent interpenetration between the social and the religious. They are the ultimate things: Girard seeks only to transform them into products of the mimetic conflict that leads to the violence of the sacrifice. And yet, even in a society removed from the deception of sacrifice, these things would remain intact. Girard can use his hypothesis to explain the cyclical nature of time, but not its irreversibility; he can explain murder, but not death; he can explain the conflict of mimetic desires, but not the existence of desire. Let us then reverse the axiom, let us say: the social is the religious. Every point of the social nexus can then be traced to a single area of the cloud of religion, inhabited by powers with which the social nexus wanted in some way to deal: the art of compromise, of giving and taking, of sacrifice. Here again,

as always, the question is whether or not to recognize those powers: Ockham's razor has cut out every name from the place inhabited by thousands and thousands of Vedic gods. But though the gods and their names have gone, the cloud remains. The cloud is the unknown god.

What Descartes terms *negligible* is the sacred: that share which is accursed, abandoned, uncontrollable. A safe area has now been created where work can be carried on undisturbed: sacrificial practices have been replaced by laboratory conditions. But the significance of ritual conduct has been upended: sacrificial gestures sought to deal with the sacred, to handle it cautiously; laboratory procedures tend to expunge it. Artificial and sterile hands move about in the glass cabinet: they collect the stiff corpse of the animal, beneath the clinical light, and they take it to the garbage bin. If a laboratory explodes, the memory of sacrifice is revived. The accident in a nuclear power plant today is a pure ritual expectation: eyes are fixed on the moment when the contagion will once again spread.

Thanks to the sacrifice, an area was set aside outside the sacrificial circle, where it was possible to live, to work, without being struck down, destroyed: for harm and destruction occur only in the other area, in that sacred area closed off within the circle.

What used to be called magic is the small part of magic that is left as soon as the foundation of its action—sacrifice—has been removed from it.

Magic is resonant thought. Sacrifice presupposes this universal resonance. This is why the outcome of the sacrifice is always uncertain: it is a perpetual ordeal, where forces clash like sounds. And no one is able to mark out the extent of a power, since its ramifications are endless. No one knows where a power ends, in the same way that no one can follow all the harmonics of a sound.

Law presupposes itself. Law therefore aspires to the unattainable condition of having a single meaning. In the absence of such final clarity, the law asks—more modestly—not to be doubted too often. It is right, therefore, that the same word, *law*, should rule society and nature. It makes no difference if those rules relate to a divine commandment or a statistical frequency: they are rules all the same, to which the world, generally

speaking, adheres. Those rules make it possible, *almost* always, to live together: the law, today, makes no claim to offer us more than that.

The *isolation* operated by knowledge on the given repeats society's act of *sampling* nature, in order to establish itself: a transition from continuous to discrete, which is necessary to establish differences—and above all *the* difference from nature itself. The sacrificial offering is that surplus that has to be cut away, expelled, celebrated, burned: otherwise society would return to coincide with nature. That surplus is the disorder and the succession of murders, prior to the law, but it is also everything that exists before society, and secretly nourishes it—it is Varuṇa's "hidden ocean," without which social order would dry up and turn to dust.[308]

This question always arises: how to use the surplus part, that part which, when added to society, would produce nature—but a nature many times over, whether infernal or paradisiacal.

Sacrifice is also a lengthy stratagem for expelling the sacred. There was a moment when living without the sacred seemed like a perfect, light, desirable condition.

To become divine or to expel the sacred: this is the oscillation, the weft of sacrifice: communion, expulsion.

Our position of reversed divinity in relation to experiment: like the gods with sacrificial offerings, we inhale the smoke, allowing the bodies to be destroyed. Today, the smoke of the sacrifice has become numbers, experimental procedures.

There are two ways of substitution: by convention (murder); by correspondence (sacrifice) of substances. Correspondence kills the substituent; convention kills the substituted. Correspondence presupposes that the substituent continues to live in the substituted, insofar as both are fragments of the "resonant substance" from which the world is created, from which it is made—and their positions are reversible: anyone, at any time, can replace another as the victim of the sacrifice, since natural death does not exist: every death is a sacrifice.[309]

Convention cancels out the given, insofar as it transposes into signs those properties of the given (and those alone) that it wishes to represent. Birth of the formal system.

Sacrifice sometimes involves the killing of a single being; convention leaves apparently intact the given that it represents. But the killing is implicit in its rule: the moment will come when whole communities will be part of the discarded reality that has been killed off by convention.

Between the opaque tranquillity of the profane and the limpid calm of the divine, the intermediate zone is sacred. It is the zone of blood, of danger, a magnet for violence. When Diomedes hurls the javelin at Aphrodite, it is not blood that spurts from the wound above the wrist, but the mysterious *íchor*, lymph, a word of unknown etymology: the gods, says Homer, "do not eat bread, do not drink dark wine, / since they have no blood and are called immortal."[310] Plutarch notes: "By this he means that food is not just a means of living, but of dying."[311] Food, blood, and death are bound together in the same circle.

The *Upaniṣads* are insatiable in attributing sacrifice to everything—to breathing, eating, lovemaking, speech, gesture—since sacrifice is the only form in the veins of the body that responds to life, that follows it in its movements, whether involuntary or arbitrary, unceasingly. The form of the sacrifice is latent in the existence of the blood: it is life that is renewed, but *for a certain time*, an uninterrupted and short-lived construction. It is life, but it can never achieve the endless duration of the clear lymph that circulates in the gods. In the same way that blood is nourished every day by unknown victims, so life in general requires that murderous construction that is repeated every day in front of the sacrificial post.

A young girl with turgid, prominent lips sank into a peat bog in Schleswig-Holstein. There she was exhumed, whole. Her tight skin, like ancient leather, gave her a Hamitic look. Her shaved head lay in profile, her eyes covered by a blindfold, and between the index and middle finger of her right hand she held a birch stick. Thus she was left to drown in the marsh, around two thousand years ago. Was she blindfolded like Eros because love is higher than intellect?

Job and Arjuna have two fundamental questions for the divinity: the first is about being killed, the second about killing. The divine answer, in both cases, is overwhelming and evasive. In both cases it is not an explanation, but a mighty cosmic epiphany. There is no precise answer. They are two ultimate questions, which require an answer nothing less than the whole. The Leviathan, which "makes the deep water boil like a cauldron"; and Kṛṣṇa, "like a mass of fire darting flames on every side."[312, 313]

Sacrifice gives a canonical, repeatable form to a pair of gestures: giving and taking. All the meanings of those two actions, without which communication—and therefore society—does not exist, are contained in sacrifice. And what could exist without those simultaneous gestures? Survival—if it could consist only in taking. But here the primordial connection emerges: there can be no taking without giving, since it is promised that for every giving there will also be a taking. The distant that prevails over the proximate, and the mediated over the immediate, are the assumption of every culture. Those who take and do not give are destroying something that may never come back. Someone who kills the stag during a hunt will never see the stag reappear. Someone who harvests the fruits of the earth may never see them grow again. The first pact, the first giving and taking, is with nature, with the animal, with vegetation—and, behind these, with the powers they embody. That which offers itself to be taken by us demands to be given to that which has offered it to us: the acceptance of this nexus is the basis for the sacrificial life, the ceremonial approach to existence. The pathos of this act is the recognition that at the center of every giving and taking there is a killing. That which we take is killed or uprooted by us. That which we give cannot be any less. It would imply, therefore, that we, too, must kill ourselves. But this would interrupt the flow of exchanges. And this is where substitution—the vast sacrificial trick—emerges. Sacrificing something that *stands for* something else sets in motion the very machinery of language and of algebra, conquering digitality. The deception by which the creature with its throat slit on the altar can be a substitute and not the thing itself provokes an enormous growth in power, such that its extension will cancel out all consciousness of the need for sacrificial giving. Pure exchange, which provides a systematic basis for substitution, gradually eradicates uniqueness, which is a reminder of the primordial victim. The world, in the end, will be inhabited only by

substitutes, therefore by victims who do not know they are victims, since the irreplaceable priest who raises the blade over them has no name and no form.

Apart from clear-thinking believers, who are an embattled minority, the world is inhabited by those who follow family beliefs or who have no beliefs at all—the moderns, those who feel bound for some reason to deny the existence of anything supernatural. These include the harshest bigots. But here we also encounter the individual most peculiar to this moment: the one who belongs to no confession, nor even to any secular bigotry (belief in science, in socialism, in the individual, in the free market, in the proletariat, in progress). So what does he think? Here, once again, there is a clear distinction between those who use sacrificial categories and those who reject them. Nietzsche speaks from the outset in sacrificial terms, following Dionysus, his god; Rudolf Carnap speaks like those many who regard sacrifice as a superstition, insofar as it is eminently unverifiable; Freud wants to reveal the originating sacrifice; Jung wants the sacrifice to be performed. Literature doesn't even need to talk about sacrifice. In one of its forms—that's to say, absolute literature (a genealogy of decadence: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Gottfried Benn; or Flaubert, Proust)—writing takes on the features of a sacrificial offering, which implies a certain destruction of the author.

German romanticism marks the reawakening of sacrifice. The dark, the impure, the uncontrolled; the landscape; the incongruous, the somnambulistic, the sentimental, the foreboding, the passionate: whatever might, with some awkward speculation, be called Negative was its terrain, where the intoxication of double meanings is once more to be found, each time invigorating and destructive, just as it had been a long time ago around the sacrificial post. But no one can now assume the role of officiant, or of sacrificer: in the absence of a ritual, of an order, the only role left is that of the victim, who wanders the forest, prey to Rudra, waiting for his fatal arrows. This is the consumption that kills Novalis and Keats. For Hölderlin, Rudra is Apollo, who strikes him down in Bordeaux. When, with Rimbaud, the writer becomes officially *maudit*, it is already time for a change, time to go selling weapons in Harar. The victim discovers sadly that the world has already prepared an archaic niche for him. He must now return to the forest.

In the city, he will be anonymous, barely visible, he will write business letters in English, he will sit in a café after office hours: the forest is Pessoa's trunk, crammed full of names.

For the experimental society to stand up and speak, it certainly didn't have to wait for Lenin, even less for Hitler—both epigones who merely found themselves with enough resources to implement the reformative visions of so many of their predecessors. The cold and inventive face of experimental society—its technological face—is scornfully silent, anonymous, and concerns itself above all with establishing new practices in factories, offices, banks, and in the rural areas. Its other face, which is garrulous and scheming, finds its original tone in the voices of the provincial Jacobins. This is what a Monsieur Leclerc, representative of the Lyon committee of Jacobins in Paris, had to say on May 12, 1793: "We have to establish Machiavellianism among the people; we have to wipe out all that is impure from the whole surface of France."[314] Monsieur Baudot addressed the Jacobins of Strasbourg on 19 Frimaire, Year II: "Those who are selfish, shortsighted enemies of liberty, the enemies of all nature, must not be counted among our children.[315] Aren't they perhaps in the same situation as all those who oppose the public good or who simply play no part in creating it? Let us destroy them entirely … Even if they were a million, shouldn't we perhaps sacrifice the twenty-fourth part of ourselves to destroy a canker that could infect the rest of the body?" But these voices still tremble with indignation. They don't have the purity of those concerned only with the future good, like Monsieur d'Antonelle, who felt that "to construct the republic it was necessary to establish approximate equality of ownership and, for this end, to kill off one-third of the population."[316] This sober extermination of "one-third of the population," so that, at long last, money and property ownership would no longer be so unequal, but sensibly distributed, was intended to root out all possibility of overweening luxury, of *cocottes*, of gambling, of vast empty spaces, as well as condemning all dissipation of *esprit*, whose essence was contrary to republican virtue. This obscure proposal, in its clear phrasing, in its eagerness for mediocrity, expresses an idea to which just one detail would later be added, for variety and spice: the specification of the Jews, or kulaks, or class enemies in general, as the prime candidates to form part of that "third of the population." Burckhardt saw the proposals of the

provincial Jacobins as "the most intimate core of the Revolution," and noted: "Here the new France can clearly be discerned.[317] Its proponents do not aim toward socialism or communism, through which they would obtain only an average universal misery and equality of benefits (whereas they sought equality of rights, with the secret qualification that the others would later be crushed). Instead, they want new private property, distributed in more or less uniform fashion, but in abundant measure. And in order for those chosen few to be *well off*, a great mass of people must die. The goal is modern French *well-being*." From his observatory in Basle, illuminated by hatred, Burckhardt had recognized the numbing well-being of capital and the punishing misery of socialism as being stars in the same constellation.

Primordial faith, that faith to which all other faiths can be traced, is the assertion of the "*nusquam interrupta connexio*," of universal interdependence.[318] The choice to recognize it, though not necessarily the claim to know it. The other possibility, that of denying it, makes it possible to believe only in what we choose, in what we wish to choose. Here there is no meaning—the meaning is given each time. And, just as it is given, so is it taken away.

The powers find many images in which to manifest themselves—the tree, the rose, the lotus, the pomegranate, all the forms of nature. *Connexio*, on the other hand, needs an action, a process in order to manifest itself: it needs the sacrifice. And this is the only adequate action for so much: for it contains death, and in that death there is killing, violence, and the life that flows. Sacrifice is the action in which the process of everything is summed up.

"*Orate sine intermissione*" ("Pray continually"): these words of Paul stand at the threshold of linear time: a line where chasms open, as in the succession of real numbers along the straight line.[319] Nothing is less uniform than linear time: marking emptiness and fullness, momentary unrelated ignition, conflict of incompatibles, the double life of the discrete and the continuous. Yet it is not defined by these characters, but by its inability to turn back on itself, its nonperiodicity. This makes it possible to think of an action that occurs "*sine intermissione*"—uninterrupted prayer. Once, prayer had its specific moments. Now the writing in the sky no

longer states what is the right moment, prior to which the action would be sacrilege. Now the moment is always right and always wrong. The only solution is a perpetual action: "*Orate sine intermissione*."

The ceremony of sacrifice is introduced and accompanied by songs, words, gestures, all prescribed in meticulous detail. But everything proceeds toward a center that is close to silence, an inarticulate murmur (*anirukta*), grains of sand of inexhaustible life, around the moment of immolation. Those present now avert their gaze and murmur the final formulas. All that can be distinguished is the neutral, sober voice of the priest who indicates the killing actions to the sacrificer. "*Agone?*" ("Shall I act?") asks the *victimarius* or *popa* (the executioner). That question, those crude Roman words, recall the ancient awareness that every action is a killing. When the priest gave his approval, the *victimarius* pushed in the knife. In India, it was preferred not to see the blood: a noose was used to strangle the victim.

The extinction of the sacrifice. The victim gradually loses its power: there is a detachment from the animal, it is no longer considered sufficiently close that it can substitute for us; there is a rejection of the human victim, who is now protected by the law. The last victim will therefore be a god who is condemned to death by the law.

The pre-Christian past is all a long process of euphemization, edulcoration of sacrifice. With Christ, sacrifice all of a sudden rediscovers its crudeness, it once again becomes a lynching—and at the same time the cycle of sacrifice is closed, since no sacrifice can follow that of Christ, except as a continual commemoration of that sacrifice—the Mass, which insists on avoiding the shedding of blood ("*incruente immolatur*"). More than the act of equating a piece of bread and a few sips of wine with the body and blood of the god/victim, what marks an insurmountable break with the past is the fact that animals will no longer be killed on altars, there will be no further attempt to drive out evil "*sanguine taurorum et hircorum*" ("with the blood of bulls and goats").[320] With the Christian era, the ritual of bloodshed disappears: a prelude to the disappearance of ritual itself. The following step demands a secular version of sacrifice: regicide, twice over, with Charles I, then Louis XVI. Here, too, a single irreversible fact, the killing of *that* victim, is enough to herald an age in which neither have goats

to be slaughtered on altars nor have beheaded kings to be commemorated. Then the word *sacrifice* returns in triumph in August 1914. It is no longer a single wretched individual—an entire generation of nameless young men is raised to the nobility of victim and buried in ditches, which are now trenches.

The Forest Doctrine

The Vedic seers regarded birth first of all as murder. The primordial world was suffocating, too dense, slimy. It was the bed of a cosmic swamp. It was an immense curled-up animal that nursed life in its bowels. Until the animal's jaws are shored open with a prop: then Dawn bursts out from the darkness and things are put into articulated order, spaced apart and breathing—they receive the "gift" of *ṛta*. That prop that forces the jaws to remain wide open is the axis of the world, it is the separation between sky and earth, it is the king with his arms raised as he is anointed in the *rājasūya* ceremony. Around this spins every wheel, divided into spokes, whereas in the beginning the wheel was single, immobile, and solid. Thanks to the god Varuṇa "the way of *ṛta* is opened up, to happily reach the other shore the road of the sky has become visible."[321] Varuṇa is the one who "raised up the prop in the bottomless space"; he who "prepared a vast way for the sun to follow."[322, 323] But Varuṇa is also the place of origins itself, "he has measured the first creation" with the power that most belonged to him: *māyā*, "measuring magic," according to Lilian Silburn's illuminating translation. The snare with which he will punish his victims forever unites his two characteristics: Varuṇa is undifferentiated waters and Varuṇa is *ṛta*, differentiating order.[324, 325]

There are gaps in the fabric of the articulate. It eludes uterine anguish (root *anĝh*), it allows the membranes of the embryo to be abandoned, leading to birth, since birth is a violent separation from everything else, the severing of Varuṇa's last snare: the umbilical cord. This metaphysical process becomes a story and it begins human history when Indra wanted to

repeat Varuṇa's exploit and thus take control, when he wanted "to distance the sky and the earth even farther."[326] Then Indra "struck a great blow at the serpent Vṛtra, who kept the waters hidden inside him, cloaked in darkness," and he seized the *soma*.[327] This is the archetype of every dragon-killing. T'ao T'ieh, Tiamat, the Minotaur, Marduk, Theseus, St. George—and so many others we come across. Indra's violent exploit introduces a new sovereignty. Indra steals sovereignty from Varuṇa, but Varuṇa remains the source of all sovereignty, which has nothing to conquer but nurtures every conquest. The anointed king will sit on a throne that is addressed as "the navel and the womb of kingship, practically equivalent to Varuṇa's watery residence."[328] But Indra who kills Vṛtra is also the king who is born—and abandons the remains of his placenta on an anthill, which here represents the matrix. For him these remains are now the evil (*pāpman*), since they would suffocate him in the life between heaven and earth. The hero murderer, who wants to be born, moves through the bowels of the monster, in the composite spirals of *t'ao t'ieh* before reaching its mouth, which will spit him out into the light. He is Theseus, who has to pass through the whole labyrinth before meeting the Minotaur face to face. The irreducible peculiarity of the labyrinth lies in the fact of being a continuous thread, a long snare coiled around itself. Like Varuṇa, who is articulation itself, but connected by an indissoluble nexus to an unarticulated origin; like the *sūtra*, the "thread" that "from the macrocosmic as well as the microcosmic point of view connects all states of existence with themselves and with their Principle," the thread about which it is said: "he who knows this thread, this inner agent, knows *brahman*, knows the worlds, knows the gods, knows *ātman*, knows everything."[329, 330] But to see the labyrinth from outside, and to kill it in the figure of the Minotaur, one must have penetrated as far as its center, which is the mouth from which one goes out into the space of isolated, separate things, arranged in a precarious manner: the space where the sacrifice must constantly weave an airy connection, between emptiness and emptiness. The hero who kills and at the same time is born is in danger of losing contact with his cosmic victim, with his enemy who is also the source of all power: with water. Goethe's Mothers are a figure of Varuṇa. That is why birth is followed by baptism; that is why the heir to the throne is anointed in the ceremony in which he is consecrated king; that is why the young calf is licked by its mother immediately after birth, so as not to become dry, so as to recall the original water, Varuṇa's "hidden ocean."[331]

The law is always double: law as a rule of the world, law as a rule between people. The first belongs to Varuṇa; the second to Mitra. Each has its regulation, its crimes, its punishments. Their action can be concordant—and then the two gods complement each other perfectly in their dual unity: Mitra-Varuṇa. The civilizing sweetness of Mitra, "everyone's friend," can exist only insofar as it is silhouetted against the dark and distant background of Varuṇa's sovereignty.[332] "Mitra is this world, Varuṇa is the other world," as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* clearly states.[333] Mitra is the world of men, Varuṇa is the rest that perpetually surrounds it, that can encircle it like a snare. By gradually ridding themselves of the world, and of the terror that comes from it, creatures united by the social contract are led to recognize Mitra alone, who is first and foremost god of the contract. And so that single law—which was Stifter's "meek law" so long as it coexisted with the order of Varuṇa—became gradually unperceivable, since around it was the ever greater, overwhelming presence of its divine companion.[334] Meanwhile, Varuṇa's snares continued to clasp their victims, victims now unaware of the fathomless place from which the snares had been thrown, unaware even that these were sentences passed by a law no one could any longer decipher.

In the end, the most ingenuous and the most important question has to be asked: are the Vedic connections (*bandhus*) real? Studying them, we gradually reconstruct their marvelous web, which extends over everything. And the epoch in which we are born compels us to see them as an immense matchstick cathedral, perfectly superfluous. We know that life reproduces itself anyway, even without their help. Still, we feel an irresistible attraction to that all-enveloping depth of resonance. And, whatever we think, at a certain point we realize we are inadvertently using some part of that submerged mantle. The only form of life that succeeds in totally rejecting Vedic connections is that of Jeremy Bentham, our Pharaoh, now a mummy in London. An unperceptive life. Vedic connections are grandly superfluous, Bentham is grandly inadequate. We waver in the middle.

Nothing is so repugnant—or so pitiful—as the language of sacrifice on the lips of someone who ignores its principles. Nothing is so devastating as the act of sacrifice in the hands of someone who ignores its principles.

Nothing is as irrepressible as the return of sacrificial words and actions in someone who ignores its principles.

Varuṇa is the origin that prevents life and without which life cannot be lived. One has to throw off Varuṇa's snares to begin living; to continue living one must be anointed, moistened by his primordial liquid.

After years of research, two great scholars spoke about the Vedic seers as follows:

Lilian Silburn

"In the eyes of the Vedic *ṛṣis* the immediate, the primordial, has an amorphous, multiform, precarious aspect. The succession of days is not guaranteed, cosmic stability must be constantly consolidated. The Vedic cosmos is in effect a painful cosmos of anxiety, contraction and narrowness (*aṃhas*), which takes the form of darkness (*tamas*) and flux (*salila*), in the image of the dark sea of the origins, the limitless, measureless, formless *arṇava* that threatens to engulf everything.

…

"For the *ṛṣis* of the Veda nothing seems certain: neither human life, nor the sunrise, nor the falling of the waters.[335] This is why most of the hymns of the Ṛg Veda follow one single pattern: the god invoked is reminded of the charitable undertaking that he once performed in favor of some other cosmic or sacrificial figure and, during the last two verses, he is implored to perform that same undertaking once again at dawn that day, since protection is generally being sought from the anxiety that goes with the absence of the prop during the night."

J. C. Heesterman

"To the Vedic thinker the whole universe was constantly moving between the two poles—of birth and death, integration and disintegration, ascension and descent—which by their interaction occasion the cyclical rhythm of the cosmos.[336] In this world of floating forms there are no hard and fast lines; conceptually different entities and notions interchange with bewildering ease. All things, entities, notions, powers are connected with each other. Nevertheless, this world is not the chaos it seems to be at first sight. The point at issue for the Vedic thinker is not to disentangle and differentiate conceptually different entities and notions but to realize, to know, their

connections (*bandhu*). In the course of this process the connections converged more and more and in the end, as is shown in the upaniṣad texts, the intrinsic coherence of the universe was formulated in the ultimate connection *tat tvam asi* [*this you are*]. In principle this identification of man with the cosmos is present in ritualistic thought. The place of sacrifice is by virtue of the code of connections identical with the cosmos: the three fires are the three divisions of space, the course of the sacrifice represents the year. On the place of the sacrifice the cosmic drama of death and rebirth, integration and disintegration, ascension and descent, is acted out and, reversely, through the same code of connections brought to bear on the macrocosm. In the center of this sacrificial world stands the sacrificer for whose benefit the cosmic processes are set in motion by the ritualists, who know the connections. Thus the whole world is centered upon the sacrificer, who 'becomes all this' and represents in his person the cosmic drama."

Louis Dumont, in a memorable essay of 1959, recognized the *saṃnyāsin*, the Indian "renouncer," as being the first example of the individual, in a sense that, after many experiences, has reached the present-day West. But, perhaps out of an excessive respect for Weber's theory of ideal types, Dumont's essay strongly emphasized the contrast between *saṃnyāsin* and brahmin, content even to see that contrast endorsed by what are today classic images of them: on the one hand "the emaciated figure of the *saṃnyāsin*, with his bowl, his stick and his orange robe"; on the other "the brahmin, whom we might characterize as he is seen on the northern gateway of the Great Stupa of Sanchi (Vessantara Jātaka), a figure with a protruding belly who displays an inimitable blend of arrogance and greed."[337] What clearer, more radical contrast could there be? But how much is that image of the brahmin due to the malevolent priests of Cecil B. De Mille, and to the urging of the *kaliyuga*? If we go back to the evolution of the Vedic sacrifice, everything in that tangle is once again called into question; the transition and the contrast no longer seem so sharp. In the end, the *saṃnyāsin* might appear to us as the extreme outcome of the Vedic sacrifice, imbued with all its lymph, harbinger of events unprecedented—first of these Buddhism—but which can only be understood by entering and losing oneself once again "in the forests and ravines of the sacrifice."[338]

"Through the cracks, as it were, of the closed ritual system," Heesterman, in a compelling study *à la* Mauss (and Granet), has managed to glimpse the outline of a preclassical phase of Vedic sacrifice.[339] His stereoscopic view makes it possible to separate and organize onto different levels the traces of the evolution of Vedic sacrifice, a wonderfully complex and articulated form, the archetype of all articulation. The liturgical cornerstone of the classical sacrifice is the relationship between the *yajamāna*—the "sacrificer," who provides the offerings, gives his ritual fee (*dakṣiṇā*) to the officiants, and will collect the fruits of the sacrifice—and the brahmin, the supreme authority in the ceremony. It is a relationship of delicate and tortuous complementarity, of inextricable complicity, of hidden opposition, such as to warrant a place of its own among the hundred and one values of the genitive case listed by the grammarian Patañjali: the *srauva* (liturgical) value, which reminds us that "the sacrifice is unquestionably a relationship between mortals and immortals, between mortals and the dead, but it is also an interpersonal and social relationship between mortals themselves."[340] Behind this relationship can be glimpsed various aspects that Heesterman has linked to another, older image: that of deadly rivalry, since the dispute is about death. In the sacrificial giving there is a twofold gesture: a giving by the *yajamāna* to the Invisibles and a giving by the *yajamāna* to the visible brahmin, who assists him in the ceremony. And the brahmin receives two gifts from the *yajamāna*: the "wounded part of the sacrifice, the part of Rudra," the point of the victim's body that has received the mortal wound, as small as a berry; and the *dakṣiṇā*, which Bloomfield—following as always the picture of mean and eager priests—wanted to translate as *baksheesh*.[341] The *yajamāna*'s sacrificial gift to the brahmin is the prototype of the poisoned gift: it is a gift of that which is most dangerous, which contains the danger itself: death. And this is true not only for the "wounded part," but for the *dakṣiṇā*, which is likened to the dismembered body of Prajāpati. The sacrificial benefactor, through his giving, is therefore primarily freeing himself of the daunting surplus of life, whose weight falls upon the brahmin. This gift is a challenge and a trap—and behind that gesture Heesterman outlines a different scenario: the sacrificial area is the area of a violent conflict and, at the same time, a table to which the guest is invited. Every sacrifice is an ordeal, an uncertain clash of forces, exposed to the breaths of heaven, ordered according to a cycle that knows two dramatic points of reversal: the two equinoxes. The person sacrificing shows how

long he can remain in contact with the "part of Rudra" (a variant of the "accursed share"), and how he can rid himself of it. But as Mauss first recognized, it is crucial to know how to enter the sacrifice, but equally crucial to know how to leave it. The *dakṣiṇā*, this holy fee, "is the price to be paid for the profane body of the sacrificer to return to its owner," to enable the *yajamāna* to return unharmed to ordinary life.[342] In it we recognize traces of the preclassical sacrifice as an appalling game of tag. In reconstructing the scenario of that phase of sacrifice, Heesterman radically alters our image of the brahmin: the purest of beings was therefore originally the opposite: he was the one who absorbed within him all impurity, accepting it as a gift passed to him from the impure *yajamāna*. The brahmin is "the *bhiṣaj*, the healer of the ritual, but this must originally have referred to the healing of death.[343] Since the classical ritual does not admit of impurity but only of infractions against a correct execution of the ritual, the brahmin's function was transformed into that of redressing ritual faults. In the preclassical system, then, his role was that of taking over death and impurity."

Encapsulated in the evolution of Vedic sacrifice, like a sphere of maximum density, is much of what would later appear elsewhere, diluted over the centuries. The brahmin, who originally sustained the whole weight of impurity, becomes the immaculate specialist in silence, who intervenes only to correct the officiants' errors. This is the passage that will be presented in the West, amid much philosophical clamor, as a transition from the tribal world of sacrifice to the world of law in the *polis*. For the Hindus, who were less overweening and less casual in getting rid of the world, it was merely a shift in ritual practices. But this passage created the conditions that led to the development of the figure of the *saṃnyāsin*, the renouncer who is the first to abandon the ritual scene.

For Dumont, this being who lives at the edge of society, this first "individual-outside-the-world" is the quintessential innovator of Indian thought, indeed "responsible for all the religious innovations that India has known."[344] He is the eccentric figure who will end up destroying every holistic framework from within, and will eventually become the "individual-in-the-world," and thus the very model of modern Western man. Intricate, ironic routes. But, as Heesterman has shown, the *saṃnyāsin* certainly is not a figure who abruptly distances himself from the world of

sacrifice and opposes it. On the contrary, the *saṃnyāsin* is the perfect result of the long, subtle, painful evolution of that world.

If the Vedic sacrifice is the most impressive, most coherent, most meticulous attempt to affirm the Whole of the world, the very rigorousness of this undertaking produces an overwhelming anxiety. The Vedic sacrifice proclaims itself in thousands of rules, in thousands of connections, in thousands of mythological details. But the more the texts build up, the more detailed the system of actions becomes, and the greater the sense of powerlessness and exhaustion. The sacrifice, which seeks to structure the world so as to make it habitable, tends to invade every fraction of time the world offers us. The foundation of sacrifice is desire, the desire for a result that is the world itself, but analysis reveals that desire inevitably constrains and suffocates, like the three membranes that threaten the newborn infant, like the excessive fullness of the undifferentiated, from which the sacrifice seeks to release us. In those three membranes cast off in the ceremony, those sacred remains of the sacrifice that contain the germ of the world in a future cycle, the brahmin ends up seeing the world itself. At that moment a further, dizzying possibility emerges: no longer constructing the world, but obtaining release from it. This is the origin of renunciation. Hidden in the forest, the brahmin turned *saṃnyāsin* will no longer attempt to establish the world, but will seek *mokṣa*, "release from the world." The obscure birth of Buddhism emerges then as the last act in the evolution of Vedic sacrifice.

The decisive step is the renouncer's choice not to eat animal flesh. The majesty of the sacrifice survives just as long as a creature is killed on the altar. If this doesn't happen, the sacrifice is promptly transformed into moral law. But the peculiarity of the *saṃnyāsin* is that he renounces something—killing—even though he recognizes it as the foundation of order. His choice bears no trace of the Enlightenment rejection of the malign *religio*—as in Lucretius—but the decision to remain in an existence before life, which may eventually be transformed into an existence beyond life.

For the Vedic seers, sacrifice coincided with the uninterrupted construction of the world. Its basis was desire, its purpose the fruit of desire. The actions were linked together in a cosmic game of giving and receiving. The crudely legal Roman concept of *do ut des* had its counterpart here in the *dadāmi te, dehi me* ("I give to you, you give to me") pointed out

by Mauss. But at that time the destiny of the whole of existence was placed at risk on every occasion, and not just the fortune of the individual. Precisely because the Vedic seers had thrown themselves into this boundless expansion of desire and its fruits, the later upaniṣadic speculation, sealed eventually in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, could reach the discovery that is the indelible mark of India: detachment, the metaphysical name for renouncing the fruit of sacrifice.

Sacrifice as action (*sacra facere*) is limited at first to the single act of the brahmin: eating the dangerous part of the victim, the "wounded part." It is finally canceled out as a visible act by the renouncer, who refuses to have any contact with the killing. But from the renouncer, from the "individual-outside-the-world," who is still obedient to the sacrificial approach, a path will be traced, through a series of circuitous routes, which Dumont has just begun to reconstruct, to the "individual-outside-the-world" of Christianity, and from him to the "individual-in-the-world" eventually outlined by Calvin, who contains "in himself, concealed in his inner constitution, an unperceived element of otherworldliness."[345] This paradoxical heir of the Vedic renouncer is none other than the modern Western individual who, having come back into the world, will end up using it in an unscrupulous and unprecedented way.

From the sacrifice, through the brahmin, to the renouncer. From the renouncer, through the individual, to technology. The process that had begun as an act of supreme affirmation of the world (and devotional empire over the world) in the doctrine of the Vedic seers, and had then been reduced to the analytic negation of the world (with the Buddha), is once again expanded, transforming the renouncer, the "individual-outside-the-world," into the emancipated and enlightened "individual-in-the-world" and, through him, into the anonymous subject of technology, concerned with dominion, control, affirmation—of what, however, is unclear, since quanta have meanwhile dissolved the world beyond any possibility of localization.

The name of the new sacrifice will now be experiment. The sacrificial attitude continues to operate in it, but unrecognized and unaware: wherever it surfaces it is rightly dismissed as a remnant of the past.

In the Western world, governments and newspapers very often talk about "sacrifices" when drastic economic measures are required. The word is now used almost as often as technical terms like "inflation." It is one of the many signs of an archaic presence. "Sacrifice," in its current usage, is a cover word for a series of economic interventions that involve individuals forgoing certain benefits. But in this definition, the word loses its irreducible meaning: destruction. Here, nothing has to be destroyed. It is supposed that the goods to be renounced will go, the more the better, to meet other purposes. Part of the money that would have been squandered away—for leisure and pleasure—will go to replenish the funds of the State. The use of the word *sacrifice* would thus be incongruous, if it wasn't adopted to emphasize how the supernatural counterpart of the individual is society itself: supernatural since it is able to utilize, to make productive in the realm of the visible, what is taken from the individual. At the same time, a real sacrifice goes on, a sacrifice that involves destruction, and which is happening uninterruptedly on the planet: sacrifice through experiment. Here it is presumed that every metaphysical memory of sacrifice is canceled out: in such an extreme way that, through some sinister lapsus, in laboratory jargon, when animals are eliminated after being used in experiments, they are described as "sacrificed." But the same scientist who uses these words, once out of the laboratory, will fail to give any credence to the word *sacrifice*: he will regard it as a superstitious remnant, while economists feel no embarrassment about using it. The world is held in this silent grip between a sacrifice that is performed unnamed and a sacrifice that is continually named but is fictitious. Until one day the differences and contradictions in the use of the word *sacrifice* are blotted out: with war, the most lavish experiment of all. "Sacrifice" then occupies even more newspaper headlines than during economic crises—and everyone knows it involves blood, destruction, and death. Uniformed soldiers are interviewed and declare themselves ready for the "supreme sacrifice." The whole nation declares itself ready each day for "sacrifice." Finally, what remain are the monuments to fallen soldiers.

Archives and Will-o'-the-Wisps

There is no essential reason why history should be set apart from literature. Quintilian once described it as "*carmen solutum*," poetry in prose. With no metrical restraint, with no preestablished formal framework, historical research is the gradual construction of an artificial memory: it involves untying the strings around endless numbers of cardboard boxes in the archives. Each file, like a room in a memory palace, contains a psychic essence which history releases. History comes into its own when it allows the sources simply to speak for themselves—and when it understands that sources can be *anything whatsoever*. It is Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* that identifies this necromantic character in history. This is the course taken by historiographers over recent decades in their thirst for the most irrelevant details, in their capacity to absorb shelf-loads of papers about to disintegrate, examining interrogations that had perhaps never before been read, not even by the person who had recorded them. Often, though, they were deceiving themselves as to their motives. Armies of researchers imagined that by digesting mountains of paper they were getting close to the truth. Some even believed that, by using numbers and tables, they were approximating science. And yet, the more they were surrounded by raw data, the clearer it became that every scrap of history is a silent enigma. Behind those names, those legal documents, those judicial proceedings, stretched the immense aphasia of life that closes in on itself, that has no contact with a before and with an after. History offers its own identifying marks to guarantee its own personal disappearance. The true historian, then, is one who crosses the eloquent desert of archives and, with an element of luck, shaking the dust off the right file, he experiences one of those moments in which names begin to chime and resonate against the silent background, building up a unique personal profile, like that of a neighbor we have occasionally passed in the street who happens to leave his door ajar, giving us a glimpse of his disastrous private life.

Richard Cobb recalls his “favorite uncle,” a country doctor whom he accompanied frequently on his rounds: “He was a tremendous gossip, and endlessly inquisitive about people, indeed, I think he only practiced medicine in order to get into other people’s houses; I would sit waiting in his car while he did his rounds, and, after each visit, he would come back to the car triumphantly with some new item of malice, rather like a researcher after a good day in the Archives Nationales.”[346] In the same way that his doctor uncle loved entering the houses of others, Cobb found pleasure in his family’s frequent moves: “On the whole, I rather enjoyed them, because in this manner I was able to see the inside of a very wide range of houses; and, all my life, it has been an almost obsessive urge with me to get my foot in the door, to get behind the façade, to get inside.[347] That, after all, is what being, or becoming, a historian is all about—the desire to read other people’s letters, to breach privacy, to penetrate into the inner room.” But his “almost obsessive urge” was quite the opposite of those people who collect stories to show how familiar they are with the Great. The true historian is the prime enemy of every souvenir hunter. First of all, the prey he is searching out is one that is forgotten, and has every reason to be forgotten. After lengthy training in this combat with opacity, he can then compete with Plutarchian figures, those who have become invisible through too much testimony, a solid carapace secreted by history to distance them from us. At that extreme of his obstinate pursuit, the historian wants to encounter Napoleon as a stranger. Then he unites with the visionary and, like Léon Bloy, can have the impudence to start a book with the words: “The story of Napoleon is certainly the least known of all stories.”[348]

An intermittent, quantic history. Expansion of phosphorescent traces. Vast protective darkness. Electric flashes. Each single scene is verifiable, even the layer of dust on the furniture. Absolute uncertainty about the sequence. Ramblings of forms. Quiet in a glasshouse, at night.

On July 22, 1809, three bogus sailors turned up at Nordendaal, a village now vanished from the maps. Many could see them arrive, in the flat countryside that offers no place to hide. They had come to kill and steal from a couple of elderly innkeepers. One of them slit the throat of Elisabeth van Aart with a pocketknife while she was showing them the bed where they were to sleep. They found a few florins and some jewelry. They also

took some wine and food. They drank one bottle by a stream. Next morning they sang a requiem for the souls of the murdered couple in the village church at Essen, on the frontier. They did the same at Antwerp, a few days later. They were seen in various taverns, played cards, talked too much, slept three to a bed. At Antwerp they drank with three *filles de joie* at an inn called La Vigne and were arrested as they returned to their own inn, Le Cygne. On February 28, 1810, the three bogus sailors were hanged in the square before Steenbergen town hall, and were left there until dusk. Over the head of each was a wooden board with the words: "Murderer of two people."

Cobb studied the records of this sordid and senseless crime. There is nothing in this story that might arouse curiosity. In every detail we sense the normality of that sordidness—and everything seems to come out of a dull mind. The actors in the story had few words—and even fewer were those that filtered from the interrogators, passing from Flemish to French. But the historian wants to go further than the judge, who is satisfied with a death sentence. The historian wants to sentence people to life. Through his intrusive investigation, he wants to snatch thoughts and even words from the unknown person who couldn't express them. During their months in prison, the three bogus sailors were forced to recall every detail of the week of *life* they had spent squandering the modest fruits of their murder: "A week, in such very young lives, is a very long time indeed.[349] And most of the time that remained to them to live was used to find out all that there was to be found out about that week, all at least that could be expressed, put into words, by people who had few words. We have tried to go one better than the judges, whose curiosity did not go beyond the point of obtaining a conviction and of wresting from the three poor wretches a plea of absolution, and to attempt to reconstruct thoughts and sensations that could not be put into words. The historian has much the same assignment as Proust, but he does not have the advantage of Proust's own memory; he has to construct, then to pillage, other people's." That is history.

After years of research, Richard Cobb realized it was ultimately more interesting to search through the archives on the trail of the counterrevolutionary Terror, more than even the Jacobin Terror. After all, "the Revolutionary Government bureaucratized death in the pursuit of a program of virtue"—and this is enough to guarantee not just horror but also

tedium.[350] The only limitation on the absolute rigor of this program of virtue related to the age of the victim: fourteen was regarded as the minimum age for the guillotine, except in certain areas where the civil war was particularly merciless. But that was as much as could be said: the Jacobin persecutors, with few exceptions (such as the blustering, tiresome, feral Claude Javogues), turned out to be the first clerks, strutting about with their papers, exemplary above all in their mediocrity, which they wore about them like their tricolor sash. A perfect example of them is an official by the name of Cochon, ready to offer his services as prefect during the Restoration, even though he had voted for the death of Louis XVI. He is much the same as the bureaucrat working away with transparent impartiality in the shadow of all regimes, killing off those who are weak at one moment and favoring those who could be strong the next. Besides, pure, out-and-out Terror generally has the disadvantage of lasting only a short time: a few months. Whereas the White Terror went on, with various peaks and troughs, from 1790 to the Consulate—and some of those involved even had the good fortune to see the second White Terror, in the summer of 1815, almost returning full circle in the space of a few years. "On pouvait s'installer dans la Contre-Révolution—One could settle down in the Counterrevolution," was a plausible feeling. In short, Cobb felt compelled, at the very beginning of *Reactions to the French Revolution*, to state with a degree of sarcasm and practicality that "historians of individuality, not to say of crankiness and of the extremes of eccentricity, will be much better off with the Counter-Terror than with the bureaucratic Terror of the summer of 1794."[351] The archives, for such people, would be wondrous: no longer the monotonous flow of accusations against various "enemies of the people," guilty of having raised an eyebrow in the manner of *ci-devants* (behaving like a pre-Revolutionary aristocrat was punishable by death according to the law of 22 Prairial), but acts of cruel valor, personal vendettas, lavish torments—each one detailed with relish, framed by exuberant novelistic details about women agitators, tribal hatred. The outlaws' lairs were heaped high with lavish costumes: that bloody nomadic existence had become a refuge for the celebration of luxury, the ultimate nourishment along with the ancient fodder of vendettas.

Postcards from the Quaternary

I

In the deep dust of the earth
a small Magdalenian whistle.
No longer a flint chipped
in a laborious struggle for life.
But tiny notches on three faces
of an eagle bone
marked out a year of moons.
Described by scholars as
“decorative” or “insignificant”:
it was the first book.
Not so much *faber* as
sky watcher, casually
he blew into the whistle.

II

The first woman’s face
is five centimeters high.
Delicate hair
rises from a slightly
rounded forehead.
Age has not blurred
her oblique and pensive gaze.
Carved in mammoth ivory
she was abandoned
at Dolní Věstonice.

III

In the cave at Sterkfontein (Transvaal),
on the appearance of the first men
recognized as men by science,

they settled in the same chamber
where their ancestors
had been devoured in turn
by hyenas and big cats,
its earlier inhabitants.

The Demon of Repetition

The repetition that rages in history presupposes a whole history of repetition. The more we go back in time, the more repetition is cloaked in majesty. The rarer written traces become, the more impressive is the role that repetition plays in them. It seems that signs are marked out most of all to indicate how something has to be repeated. Etiquette is the first literary genre. For something to make sense, it has to be repeated—and in repeating one thing, everything needs to be repeated. During the consecration of a king, but also during a hunting expedition, history has to be recapitulated from its origins, so that from it sprouts the tiny bud that is the new action, protected and sustained by all previous actions, the latest stitch at the center of the immense fabric. Passing down through time's race toward us, the powers of repetition are gradually canceled out: like the goddess in the Underworld, where the Invisible Hand snatches a cloak and a diadem from her at every threshold. What appears in the end is not stark nakedness, but an empty frame, an animal legacy that cold-mindedness would like to wash away. Paul Valéry—the genuine New Man of the kind that became chemically distilled in the solitude of the algebraic Ego—looks upon that empty frame as the most tedious scourge: he calls it "cyclosis," "the cyclomania of our essence."[352] And so he writes: "I was born, at the age of twenty, exasperated by repetition—that is to say, against life. Getting up, getting dressed, eating, evacuating, going to bed—and always these seasons, these stars—And history!

"I know everything by heart——

"to the point of madness … This table has repeated itself before my eyes for 39 years!—This is why I cannot bear the countryside, working the land, the furrows, waiting for the harvests—All this is regarded as 'poetic.'

"But for me *poetic* is the opposite of this sad industry, mortally circular like the daytime rotation and the other——."[353]

Below the Acheron, which Freud had promised to stir up in the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, lies the region of blind germinations, the vast inorganic silence that is sometimes broken by improbable life: Freud reached this fathomless place, well "beyond the pleasure principle," immediately after the end of World War I.[354] But what was driving him to question "twenty-five years of intense work," and, above all, using theories that could easily be considered "mystical," blending them with the libidinal opprobrium of his treacherous son, C. G. Jung?[355] What was still so deeply troubling the psyche of Sigmund Freud, the man who had the peculiar quality of recapitulating the whole of Western history in each of his moments of anxiety? It was repetition. With the perfect candor that, along with his "intellectual impartiality" in describing the "ultimate things," makes him the only analyst who succeeded through his work in raising himself to the sacrificial status of Patient, Freud tells us: "Once, as I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was strange to me, on a hot sunny afternoon, I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt.[356, 357] Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to abandon my exploratory walk and get straight back to the piazza I had left a short while before." Freud then moves on to a second example, where the guile of "involuntary repetition" appears even more uncanny, since it takes the form of pure chance, of a coincidence that is found in the world without even requiring the ambivalent collaboration of the subject wandering aimlessly in a foreign land.[358] And here Freud, as on so many other occasions, fails to tell us he is referring to a personal experience: "We of course attach no

importance to the event when we give up a coat and get a cloakroom ticket with the number, say, 62; or when we find that our cabin on board ship is numbered 62.[359] But the impression is altered if two such events, each in itself indifferent, happen close together, if we come across the number 62 several times in a single day, or if we begin to notice that everything which has a number—addresses, hotel rooms, compartments in railway trains—always has the same one, or one which at least contains the same figures. We do feel this to be 'uncanny,' and unless a man is utterly hardened and proof against the lure of superstition he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number, taking it, perhaps, as an indication of the span of life allotted to him." The person not "hardened and proof against the lure of superstition" was Freud himself in the face of repeated appearances of the number 62 during his travels in Greece in 1909, when he was obsessed by the idea that he would die at the age of sixty-two. And, as he was writing those lines in his essay "*Das Unheimliche*" ("The Uncanny"), without mentioning that they referred directly to him, he was only a few months past his sixty-second birthday. Immediately after setting out these two examples, Freud introduces for the first time (and referring already to *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*], which would soon be published) a detailed account of repetition-compulsion, the last and supreme divinity in his mythology: "It must be explained that we are able to postulate the principle of a *repetition-compulsion* in the unconscious mind, based upon instinctual activity and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure-principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the tendencies of small children; a principle, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients."[360] Here Freud was trying to delve beyond endopsychic reality, to find a way into metapsychology, to return to dealing with the demonic power of nature. The same repetition that nature continually offers us in the processes of its forms emerges everywhere in the life of the psyche: not just in the *fort-da* (*gone-there*) repeated by the child who makes the wooden reel disappear and reappear always to control his worry over his mother's absence; not just in the dreams of someone who is suffering from traumatic neurosis and always goes back to those dreams to encounter the trauma; not just in the behavior of the patient who, when urged by transference neurosis, acts out those personal elements repressed

rather than remembering them; not just in the history of the embryo that is "obliged in the course of its development to recapitulate the structures of all the forms from which it is sprung, instead of proceeding quickly by the shortest path to its final shape" (all cases discussed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*).[361] There is another repetition, even more subtle and menacing, which is given as an example in *The Uncanny* to introduce repetition-compulsion and not mentioned again in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—a roaming, uncontrollable repetition: that of casual signs that accumulate, that suggest a nexus, a "secret meaning." Here the repetition is hybrid, it forms a part of the changeable scene of the outside world and, at the same time, of the mental scene where it comes to claim its place. The repetition of a sign in the outside world transforms it into an omen: it suggests a significance whose origin we don't know and cannot ignore. Every meaning that we ourselves have not established or produced is uncanny. The coincidences are uncanny because they suggest a destiny, a network of significances that precede us, accompany us, are playing about with us. The repetition-compulsion is directed at someone inside us (the "Double," heir of the "Self" of the Upaniṣads) who is shrouded by that network of meanings—and sometimes appears there replicating our own features. Some people who are not neurotic give the impression "of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power": but what disturbs them is not so much the ability of the mind to become caught up in repetition, as much as the elastic readiness with which reality approaches them, promptly offering its services so that the repetition-compulsion occurs.[362] The most intolerable suspicion, for Freud, is that there might be a complicity between the outside world and the psyche: and yet he came across such complicity in the estuary where the waters of the unconscious mix with those of the world. Being unable to admit that such conspiracy could implicate a surplus of meaning—since this would have undone his whole construction—he admitted only that it indicated the convergence of nature and the psyche toward one and the same point: the origin itself, as a place of the undifferentiated, of meaningless repetition, where meaning—like every tension—is canceled out.

This was the unrecognized threat that such creepy moments of daily life transmitted—and, in *The Uncanny*, Freud was careful to give a reassurance, deceiving even himself, that he'd had no further experience of them for

many years: “The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy of perception would be more in place.[363] It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression.” Once having opened the door onto the world outside us, two opposing possibilities present themselves: either to accept a nature that speaks through capricious oracles, that extends into the psyche and intervenes in it; or to consider nature as a still life, jealous of the life that has developed around it, and eager to lead it back to inanimate stillness. It was this second path that Freud *was forced* to take. In the most radical lines of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the unnamed Thanatos appears as a supreme power that doesn’t so much clash with Eros, but uses him for his own purposes (“the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts”).[364] The erotic surge covers the uninterrupted action of death instincts, which “seem to do their work unobtrusively.”[365] Rather than conflict, it is a cruel harmony. It is a convergence, with two differing styles, toward the same purpose: punishment for that guilt which is life itself, its enforced return to that inorganic stillness, from which a dark and unnatural tension has made it emerge. Freud describes it as “a force of whose nature we can form no conception,” and explains: “The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out.[366, 367] In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state.” In the tangled structure of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud outlines the insurmountable cosmogony of modernity. Valéry’s impatience with Freud’s notion of repetition and his dark vision of repetition-compulsion spring from a single source: a terror at the nonhuman origin of meaning, expressed in the demonic whim of coincidences and in the relentless monotony of nature. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* has yet to be read as the record of that solitary patient, Sigmund Freud, who had the great strength to recapitulate, in the most sober and exact detail, the syndrome of Western history: to obtain an order out of nature, but on the condition of accepting that such order, as a variant of repetition-compulsion, is just one long vicious circle that leads back to the cancellation of itself. As Freud wrote, gazing at the landscape of civilization: “Whereas cleanliness is not to be expected in nature, order, on the contrary, has been imitated from her.[368] Man’s observation of the great astronomical regularities not only furnished him with a model for

introducing order into his life, but gave him the first points of departure for doing so. Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat which, when a regulation has been laid down once and for all, decides when, where, and how a thing shall be done, so that in every similar circumstance one is spared hesitation and indecision." "Every similar circumstance" includes coincidences: but their function will be that of recalling the insignificance of everything. For Freud, coincidences can only allude to death. "It was still an easy matter at that time for a living substance to die," writes Freud in his hallucinatory vision of primordial times.[369] Civilization, on the other hand, is a protracted death. Above all, it is a question of style: choosing "ever more complicated *détours*," and ensuring that the organism is able to achieve what it most wants: "to die only in its own fashion."[370, 371] "The fact that man shakes off what does not relate to him is, for me, a proof that something of the kind exists," said Goethe to Eckermann, in relation to entelechy.[372] For Freud, that grand notion narrows down to the ultimate claim of the individual and of civilization: for each to die in their own way, to draw a final arabesque before the return to that mute stillness that ignores meaning.

There is one phenomenon that is the perfect reversal of that repetition of the world's disparate signs becoming condensed into as many omens: it is the forced repetition of a word, which after a short interval of time loses all meaning and is lost before us like an opaque husk of sound. In these two experiences we discover, in the private and intimate space of our minds, the original schism: when, on the one hand, there was a world overladen with meanings, and those meanings had a vast, uncontrollable, overwhelming life of their own, so that their excessive power ended up converging on one single meaning: death; and, on the other hand, another world was forming, the enclosure of culture, which enforced the power of arbitrary will, the capacity to give names, to establish meanings with the artifice of convention. If we shy away from the repetition of signs that come to us from the world, it is because we find that in such repetition the powers of the world are always there, perhaps dormant, certainly distant, but nevertheless present and ready to swallow us up as though we ourselves were a word in their language. If we feel a strange unease in observing how a certain word, automatically repeated, seems to lose all connection with its meaning, it is because at that same moment we sense the weakness, the precarious nature of the act on which every culture is based. Thought

involves setting off falteringly toward that place of twofold uneasiness, a simultaneous attempt at escaping from nature and culture. This is why thought is an irregular and improbable activity.

Sacrifice: repeating the irreversible.

Coincidence is the appearance of a constellation in the life of a single person. The night sky cannot be seen in the large cities: so it re-forms itself within us in these fleeting apparitions.

Myth, if it is not repeated, wears out, dying eventually like the gods, after many deaths. But the world, which has even forgotten to bury it, and has immediately plunged into the statistical cloud of the New, suddenly realizes that its actions cannot manage to be arbitrary, even though they claim to be. Otherwise, how do we explain that involuntary repetition, that dull murmur of familiar words, of déjà vu, of fixed movements that accompany it? Everything now is a prayer mill. Tibet is nowhere to be seen, no one prays, no authority can demand their ritual payment: and yet everything continues to go through a succession of obscure stations, in a circle. When Talleyrand was alive, those stations had pristine names, ready to be squandered in lecture halls: Ancien Régime, Revolution, Terror, Directory, Empire, the Restoration, Citizen-King. Never again would those clean profiles be seen on the last medals, soon removed from circulation, to be replaced by paper money without any second thought—more practical, more potent. Nature was also bound in paper, newspaper. But the one thing that would not be bound—indeed it bound other things more than ever—was repetition itself. Marx once felt the vertigo of repetition when he read in the newspaper about a new 18 Brumaire, led by a new Bonaparte. But he immediately banished the ghost, since he was convinced that he himself was the ghost, the one who would hand out the parts for the Final Rehearsal. The repetition had no end, and soon Marx would also be horribly repeated.

"The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living.[373] At the very time when men appear engaged in revolutionizing things and themselves, in bringing about what never was before, at such very epochs of revolutionary crisis do they anxiously conjure up into their service the spirits of the past, assume their names, their battle cries, their costumes to enact a new historic scene in such time-honored disguise and

with such borrowed language. Thus did Luther masquerade as the Apostle Paul; thus did the revolution of 1789–1814 drape itself alternately as Roman Republic and as Roman Empire; nor did the revolution of 1848 know what better to do than to parody at one time the year 1789, at another the revolutionary traditions of 1793–95." This was what Marx wrote in December 1851 (though plundering images and phrases from an earlier letter from Engels of December 3); and before that, between November 1850 and March 1851, in Sorrento, Alexis de Tocqueville was working away on his *Souvenirs* of the revolution of 1848 ("there have no doubt been crueler revolutionaries than those of 1848 but certainly not, I believe, more stupid"), noting in this respect in May: "It was the parody of February 24, in the same way that February 24 was itself the parody of other revolutionary scenes."[374, 375] Earlier, recording the attack on the Chamber of Deputies, he had written: "Our Frenchmen, especially in Paris, gladly mix memories of literature and theater with their more serious manifestations; and this often leads to the idea that the feelings they demonstrate are false, whereas they are just awkwardly decorated.[376] In this case, the imitation was so apparent that the terrible originality of the events remained hidden. That was the time when everyone's imagination was tinged with the garish colors used by Lamartine in his *Girondins*. The men of the early revolution were alive in everybody's spirit, their actions and their words present in everyone's memory. All that I saw that day carried the visible mark of those memories; and it always seemed to me that everyone was far more concerned about acting out the French Revolution than continuing it … Although I could see the end of the performance would be terrible, I could never really take the actors seriously; everything seemed to me like a bad tragedy performed by a few provincial amateurs."

Both Marx and Tocqueville had therefore recognized that they lived in an age blinded by the New, even though it continued practicing the cult of bloody repetition. The sequence tended to be this:

> the New has to happen (from the time when the spirit of "eternal revision," as Burckhardt would soberly describe it, receives the anointment of sovereignty);[377]
>
> the New tends inevitably to repeat some fragment of the Canonical Phases, which had in turn repeated other specters;
>
> the eruption of technology continually modifies dimensions and weights, distorting actions in a continual anamorphosis, which invades time;
>
> repetition unleashes its unforeseen novelty and the New is faithfully repeated in the alliance between grotesque, atrocious and portentous, which transmits the psychic shock

of the Modern.

"Verification-compulsion" is what it could be called: this disease has infected us, forever. But where does this disease originate—in what desire, in what sense? If the West has been so violently struck by the need to affirm, to insist upon repetition, this is because never before has the absolute unrepeatability of every element, the precarious but irreducible life of every detail, made itself so firmly felt as in the West. Without verification-compulsion, without empty repetition, we could not have endured the surfacing of disconnected appearance, which is fleeting, has no offspring, has no correspondences—that emergence which had never before been evoked *by itself*. The unique flavor, the anguished but triumphant and looming sense of every pure form of the West is to be found in this precariousness, up to its farthest-reaching manifestations, where destruction is imminent. Hence the need for stone, for solidity. But no civilization has been so lacking in solidity, so exposed, as the West. The West abandons mythological repetition in order to impose upon itself a repetition spread in matter, since it questions not only whether everything is repeated in a certain way, but whether the world itself, as it is, can reproduce itself. This immense sense of suspension requires an equally extreme counterbalance—and at the point of balance we find a first stubborn, brazen choice: it emerges from the piano, it is the *moment musical*, a paralyzing, diffusing and yet affirmative power (and this time there is no need for magic, which is always overburdened with meaning), whereas that sound always and only returns in one phrase, a clear and fateful quaver: wanting what passes because it passes. "… Nothing, and enamel on top of it," whispered Gottfried Benn.[378]

CHEVALIER DE B***: Whether history repeats itself is a fatuous question, but the effects of thinking about repetition are devastating. In the act of repetition, as in a faded scrap of Oriental cloth, survives the heritage of myth, the capacity to consider an act as a model, the sense of a destiny connected to a form. Louis XVI read and reread, with fear and horror, the story of Charles I, until he, too, ended on the scaffold. The Duc d'Orléans thought of reenacting the Fronde of Cardinal de Retz, but found himself on the same scaffold soon after. Events can overlap—or stand in stark contrast to each other: what counts is that any action contains within it the ghost of the other action. Just as there is no book

> that is not the reprise, or response to, or consequence of another book, so too, with every gesture, the hand that moves is held by another invisible hand that guides, or encourages, or restrains it. In relation to every event, we need to ask ourselves: what was trying to be repeated here? what was being answered here? Sometimes events are so distorted by the eruption of chance that it is hard to detect any sign of an historical nexus. The whole of our relationship with the past lies in the thought of repetition; figures detach themselves from time, like a massive lapse of memory, anxiously waiting to reappear. At times they are wretched and awkward—and sometimes, at that very moment, they reach the maximum, murderous, force of impact.

Repetition is the invisible step back that accompanies every gesture. Historians stand out for their capacity to connect this to their account of actions, of visible exploits. But, to achieve it, they must forget all caution and mingle with the shadows, emerging from the past as if from Avernus. Michelet, Burckhardt, Warburg, Tocqueville …

Chateaubriand saw life in Paris during the years of the Revolution as like the "collection of ruins and tombstones from every century, heaped up in disarray in the cloisters of the Petits-Augustins: except that the wrecks I am talking about are alive and constantly changing."[379] The repetition is not just of order, but of chaos, of the time when various orders come together—Greek and Gothic, blood and enamel. The Revolution was also the first total spectacle, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that emerged from the drawing rooms and from the sewers, and trod the stage of a city. François-Joseph Talma made his theater debut immediately after seeing the Marquis de Favras hanged. Chateaubriand assures us that "the avenues of the Tuileries garden were thronged with giggling women," and the footsteps of the crowd echoed around the recently deserted convents "like in the abandoned halls of the Alhambra."[380, 381]

Like every great mythologist, Freud bases everything on something we can say little about: the return to the inorganic. In their migrations over thousands of miles, birds and fish are supposed to be searching for their original home, which should be the inertia of matter, before the emergence of life. This is the inevitable consequence of a principle that, under various

names, had always guided him—at the time of the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, he called it a "principle of neuronic *inertia*," and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he would call it "principle of constancy," describing it as a "tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible."[382, 383] If, therefore, the pleasure principle implies a return to an earlier state (and here the myth of Eros in the *Symposium* comes in useful to Freud, who was asking himself, with great perplexity, what event copulation could possibly repeat), when translated into phylogenetic terms it implies a return to the inorganic, which is the state *preceding* life. Freud's construction is based on nothing more than this: but the preconditions for this inconspicuous gesture are precisely what remains to be explained, and what Freud doesn't wish to explain. It is difficult to let the "principle of constancy" pass as an experimental observation like so many others. This principle, for Freud, is the invisible Hermes that enables him to construct what is most essential in this perspective: a caesura, a defensive barrier—otherwise the subject (i.e., Freud himself) would fall into the foul swamp in which the Ouroboros lives. And Freud chooses the least ascertainable caesura, the one marked by the emergence of life, since he needs to identify all life that precedes *our* life (thus the whole of nature) with death. He is not therefore talking about the inorganic, a shrewd device that allows him to frame his discourse with casual reference to various scientific publications. What he is anxious to establish is the equation between the whole of nature (organic and inorganic) and death. Why indeed should the repetition-compulsion be the expression of a death instinct? Hadn't Freud himself explained admirably, in relation to the *fort-da* game, the child's role in controlling, in dominating, and therefore in exalting the power of life? We have to search deep into the prose of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* before we find the radiant *peradam*, the phrase from which everything else descends: "The elementary living entity would from its very beginning have had no wish to change; if conditions remained the same, it would do no more than constantly repeat the same course of life." But for Freud, that ordinary "course of life," inasmuch as it is opposed to the "tension" that establishes the emergence of real life (our life), becomes equivalent to death itself.[384, 385] The tolerance of primordial nature toward life extends only as far as allowing it to appear (life is *octroyée*, granted), but so as then immediately to let it be repeated—

and in this way reabsorb it within itself, in its own death knell. The model of repetition is not just the rotation of the stars, but physiology: breathing, sleep, hunger. For Freud, everything bears the mark of death—like the number on the cloakroom ticket he is given. It is not chance alone, but the whole of nature that we must keep at a distance. A final step: nature is death first of all because it kills. Nature is always an excess that threatens us. In the scientistic delirium toward which Freud always wished to lead the psyche, translating its "figurative language" into that of physiology or chemistry—which in turn is yet another "figurative language" as Freud himself observed with cruel self-irony—there is one frequently recurring sign: the excessiveness of nature's dominance over perception, which survives only because it takes "small specimens of the external world," because it limits itself "to sample it in small quantities."[386, 387, 388] Indeed, to save itself from the rampant spread of nature, the psychic apparatus even kills a part of itself to create within it an insensitive "protective shield," a last defense against the murderous fury of external nature. This "protective shield" is the "outer layer" of the apparatus itself, which consents to die, becoming "to some degree inorganic" in order to save "all the deeper [layers] from a similar fate."[389, 390, 391, 392] This visionary glimpse has no connection with any physiological process, but has everything to do with the ancient theory of sacrifice, which is transcribed here into the "figurative language" of an imaginary physiology, where—if we want to understand what is happening—we have only to replace the words *protective shield* with the unutterable words *sacrificial victim*. This, Freud observes, in regard to the stimuli that reach us from outside: but the cerebral cortex is a cork panel between the wind and the waves: we defend ourselves from the wind of the world by perceiving as little of it as possible, raising up against it the part of us we have killed in the sacrifice, but the waves come from the body's obscurity, and against them there is no defense—apart from resorting to "protection,"[393] which catapults into the external world the battering rams that assail us from within. In a few swift and unobtrusive moves, Freud here arrived at the deduction that paranoia was a normal and uninterrupted experience of the psyche.

The discoverer of laws in history will always resemble the wild inventor of useless patents, whose method is that of cornering his interlocutor in order to explain how, at home, he has managed to achieve perpetual motion.

Why not come and see the machine for yourself? It's here … Ever since Polybius wrote his elementary reflections on the cyclical nature of forms of government—first monarchy, then aristocracy, then democracy, then monarchy again, ad infinitum—history has continued to prove him right, as it has done with many other, far more complex, cyclical theories. But it has done so with disdainful magnanimity, since in the end this law—if we can call it that—was an elaborate way of showing the pointlessness of history, which becomes all the more apparent once its hidden mechanism is revealed. For history to have an unassailable meaning, a *télos* is required, which cancels out history itself. Otherwise, every secularized cyclical pattern of forms leads history back to a much-feared morphology, which reaffirms nature's supremacy over it. And here Spengler appears: " 'Mankind,' however, has no aim, no idea, no plan, any more than the family of butterflies or orchids."[394] Freud—out of intellectual sobriety and karmic loyalty—could not admit a *télos*, but nor could he abdicate in favor of nature. So he bowed to mute origins, admitting their ultimate hegemony: but he would never grant them the character of unnamed life. They were the marks of death, from which life detached itself with a gesture of momentary whim. Civilization is a curved line of seashells on the sand, but enclosed within it is the cipher of its form. The sea that washes it away will never possess it.

"And you shall raise high your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea and cleave it in two, so that the Children of Israel can pass through the sea on dry ground," says Yahweh to Moses pursued by the Egyptians.[395] "Then the cloud that covered the camp was seen, / the dry land rising up out of what had been water, / out of the Red Sea an unhindered highway / and a grassy plain out of the tempestuous waves / by which they passed, as one people, they who were protected by your hand," sings the Wisdom of Solomon.[396] Passing through the Red Sea on dry land—a salvific event, a glint of the elect—is also a repetition of the Creation: the Red Sea dries up just as in the beginning the earth, the soil on which those feet protected by the Lord walked, was separated from the waters under the firmament: "Elohim called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of the waters he called Seas."[397] Now the "grassy plain" that substitutes the "tempestuous waves" is a momentary excess of divine love. If this meant a gradual drying up of nature, it would turn into dire punishment. But that image, promising a total

draining of nature, would continue to guide many generations: the dry priests of Judaism, those who prefer to keep their feet on the cultivated plain rather than venture into the sea, those who regard the sea as no more than the tomb of the Enemy. Later, when Yahweh's presence is obscured, the divine gift will become the dream of a vast reclaimed land, no longer a miracle come down from the sky, but a laborious conquest of the subject.

Freud's heraldic motto—*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* ("Where Id was, there shall I be")—presupposes the drying up of the Zuider Zee, and once again in relation to a "salvation," though secularized, anguished, and uncertain: "It may safely be doubted […] whether this road will lead us to the ultimate truths from which salvation is to be expected.[398] Nevertheless it may be admitted that the therapeutic efforts of psychoanalysis have chosen a similar line of approach. Its intention, indeed, to strengthen the ego, to make it more independent of the superego, to widen its field of perception and enlarge its organization, so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id. Where the id was, there the ego shall be. It is work of culture—not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee."

We can hear another dry priest in Lévi-Strauss. Having reached the Finale of his tetralogy, he feels the need to describe himself as "someone who has never felt the slightest twinge of religious anxiety."[399] What a steadfast intellect, in one who for years and years, with the painstaking devotion of a new Linnaeus, had drawn out the taxonomic table of myths where the tribes of the "savage mind" had summoned up their gods! And yet, so long as he remains in the pure vegetable and mineral purity of myth, Lévi-Strauss is swept along by a sure and unconditional passion to reconstruct those astonishing architectures that unconsciousness protects from the vicissitudes of life. If in fact some errant phenomenon of "the life of the emotions" were to emerge too insistently in the myth, Lévi-Strauss would not concern himself in it, but would leave that task to the care of priests of another, darker kind: "Any phenomenon of the life of the emotions which does not reflect, on the level of consciousness, some important event hindering or accelerating the work of understanding, is not a matter for the social sciences; it belongs rather to biology and its discussion must be left to others."[400] There is something, however, in those final pages of *Mythologiques* that still disturbs him—and constantly reemerges in the experience of his savage thinkers as well as in the sharp comments of certain academic colleagues: ritual. Driven by a sad

compulsion, those subjects who elaborate myths have always tended to celebrate rituals. Lévi-Strauss observes them with sympathetic embarrassment, and finds in their ceremonial actions that "characteristic mixture of stubbornness and ineffectiveness which explains the desperate, maniacal aspect of ritual."[401] We feel ourselves here in a vein close to that of Freud's observations on obsessive actions, on the neurotic "ceremonial" as a descendant (and progenitor) of "religious practices": "Any activities whatever may become obsessive actions in the wider sense of the term if they are elaborated by small additions or given a rhythmic character by means of pauses and repetitions."[402] Contained here in one sentence are the two peculiarities that, according to Lévi-Strauss, in the end prove essential in the ritual: "fragmenting" (in Freud, the elaboration of "small additions") and "repetition." What is the purpose of these two elements? Before the glory of the Discontinuous, before the majestic procession of binary oppositions that constitute the algebraic building blocks of civilization, ritual continues to bear witness to the unhappiness, the obscure nostalgia that is not satisfied by the Discontinuous. Using a theatrical ploy worthy of a Wagnerian end-of-act climax, Lévi-Strauss reveals here a thought that had been bothering him like an unwelcome companion: ritual not only doesn't duplicate the myth being acted out (which would be a horrible *contaminatio*), but actually chooses to go in the opposite direction. The ritual seeks to regain the "fluidity of the real" (this is what the Red Sea is now called, after centuries of intellectual sobriety). Ritual seeks to plunge us once again in that mobile element that "constantly tends to escape through the mesh of the grid that mythic thought has placed over it so as to bring out only its most contrasting features."[403] A desperate venture, which obliges Lévi-Strauss to resort to the language of the "life of the emotions" (here too an age-old abrasion has produced this formula), which is now set out menacingly, and in the very way that Freud had earlier described: "Ritual, by fragmenting operations and repeating them unwearyingly in infinite detail, takes upon itself the laborious task of patching up holes and stopping gaps, and it thus encourages the illusion that it is possible to run counter to myth, and to move back from the discontinuous to the continuous.[404] Its maniacal urge to discover the smallest constituent units of lived experience by fragmentation and to multiply them by repetition, expresses the poignant need of a guarantee against any kind of break or interruption that might jeopardize the continuance of lived experience …

On the whole, the opposition between rite and myth is the same as that between living and thinking, and ritual represents a bastardization of thought, brought about by the constraints of life … This desperate, and inevitably unsuccessful, attempt to reestablish the continuity of lived experience, segmented through the schematism by which mythical speculation has replaced it, is the essence of ritual." It is a vision of sad desolation, which runs counter to the transparent *harmonia plantarum* that Lévi-Strauss loves to contemplate: that harmony between the genetic code, the "savage mind" and—clash of cymbals—the scientific intellect which deciphers both the genetic code and the "savage mind," all united by the indissoluble and flashing nexus of binary opposites. These, and only these, are the blocks used to build the House of the Discontinuous, the only true Temple of Solomon, which will rise up on the land claimed from the sea.

Lévi-Strauss's revelations about the world and about himself at the end of his tetralogy help us understand why he is always so unconcerned about the messiest of rituals: sacrifice. But this unwelcome guest in his anthropology could not fail to appear, if only in passing, in the final orchestration of the themes. And it will be at the very point where Lévi-Strauss wants to emphasize, in criticizing Victor Turner, how ritual creates precisely nothing. Indeed, in relation to "categories, laws, or axioms," adamant agents of the Discontinuous, it can indeed be said that ritual "endeavors rather, if not to deny them, at least to obliterate, temporarily, the distinctions and oppositions they lay down, by bringing out all sorts of ambiguities, compromises and transitions."[405, 406] In the geometrical city of the intellect, sacrifice is the harbor area: narrow alleyways, illicit dealings, the smell of the sea. And here Lévi-Strauss gives a rapid analysis in *The Savage Mind*, where he had sought to separate totemism and sacrifice once and for all, so that the tireless Australian classifiers were finally freed from any suspicion of such a blemish. The opening is already drastic: "That it should have been possible to regard totemism as the origin of sacrifice in the history of religion remains, after so long, a matter of astonishment."[407] But the reason for the scandal is immediately clear: the totemic system is based on series of parallel classifications, finely and rigorously developed, according to the sound rules of the discontinuous; sacrifice, on the other hand, is based on contiguity, on tracing and retracing a path from profane to sacred, and from sacred to profane: the principle of substitution, which dominates it, is

joined, in the shadow, with the imperative of connection, and this latter implies a sequence of links that cross nature and society in every sense. "Sacrifice therefore belongs to the realms of continuity."[408] And this is the realm that Lévi-Strauss will never legitimize, the place of contaminating "ambiguities," "compromises," "transitions." Lévi-Strauss regards the form of the sacrifice as the greatest offense against culture: "sacrifice turns to comparison as a means of effacing differences."[409] Here, without pronouncing their name, he evokes, as silent witnesses, the ultimate opponents of his thought: the Vedic seers. For him, no form of thought is as repugnant as their tireless straddling of three worlds, saying "this is that," with no respect for any taxonomic boundary, without accepting those gaps that should alone guarantee meaning and are each time covered at least with wild orchids. Meanwhile, behind everything, looms the hated category: interdependence, no longer of relationships but of substances, a mystical plexus that envelops every logical mesh. This is the real Enemy: and here pathos ends up betraying the scholar. The confrontation between totemism and sacrifice becomes more and more harsh, until it is transformed into a sort of sorrowful condemnation: "Totemism, or so-called totemism, confines itself to conceiving a homology of structure between the two series [the natural species and social segments], a perfectly legitimate hypothesis, for social segments are instituted, and it is in the power of each society to render the hypothesis plausible by shaping its rules and representations accordingly.[410] The system of sacrifice, on the other hand, makes a nonexistent term, divinity, intervene; and it adopts a conception of the natural series which is false from the objective point of view, for, as we have seen, it represents it as continuous." Here we surprise the great anthropologist while he is blaming a religious ceremony for speaking about something "nonexistent," which is "divinity." Why such intemperance? Perhaps we are nearing the threshold where Lévi-Strauss feels the "savage mind" is becoming too "savage" and no longer worthy of being called "mind." The analysis is paralyzed by a feeling of *horror continui.* And the language is suddenly no longer that of passionate description, but of rejection—almost, one might say, for moral reasons. Such thinking *must not* be thought. Eventually he comes close to insult, with a shrug of the shoulders of an upright, taxpaying *citoyen*: "To express this difference in level between totemism and sacrifice it is not, then, enough to say the former is a system of reference and the latter a system of operations, that

one works out a schema of interpretation while the other sets up (or claims to set up) a technique for obtaining certain results: that one is true, and the other is false.[411] Rather, to put it precisely, classificatory systems belong to the levels of language: they are codes which, however well or badly made, always aim to make sense. The system of sacrifice, on the other hand, represents a private discourse wanting in good sense for all it may frequently be pronounced." The conclusion of anthropological science would therefore be that sacrifice is a discourse "wanting in good sense."

Goethe's Birthday

At Karlsbad—there for the waters—he listened "with tears in his eyes" as Angelica Catalani sang "Kennst du das Land" at the home of Prince Josef Schwarzenberg, until her voice broke in a fit of jealousy.[412] He wrote to his son, August, that the inhabitants now behaved like pirates toward visitors. "In any case, everything is much more expensive and becomes even more so with each passing day by reason of the exchange rates."[413] Approaching his sixty-ninth birthday, he felt the forces of his entelechy were now urging him toward "repeated puberty," a long Indian summer.[414] He wanted to celebrate alone, in solitude. Eduard Genast recounts: "Karl, Goethe's faithful servant, was ordered on the morning of August 27 to bring up two bottles of red wine and place them on the two windowsills in front of him. After which Goethe begins pacing up and down the room, pausing at regular intervals, first at one window, then the other, emptying a glass each time. Some time later, Rehbein, who had traveled with him to Karlsbad, arrives.[415]

GOETHE: What a dear friend you are! What's the day today, what date is it?
REHBEIN: It's August 27, Excellency.
GOETHE: No, it's the twenty-eighth, it's my birthday.
REHBEIN: But no, I'd never forget that; it's the twenty-seventh.
GOETHE: You're wrong. It's the twenty-eighth.

REHBEIN *firmly*: The twenty-seventh.
GOETHE *rings, enter Karl*: What's the date today?
KARL: Twenty-seventh, Excellency.
GOETHE: What the … Bring me the calendar!
Karl brings the calendar.
GOETHE *after a long pause*: Damnation! Then I've got myself drunk for nothing."

Sacrificial Crumbs

After Golgotha, the victim was set loose from the sacrificial post. Christian concern for living creatures would demand only an immolation *per figuras*. But the miasma of the sacrificial victim had to be removed: such an agglomeration of nature, power, vulnerability, malediction, and healing virtue was no longer permissible. It had to migrate far away, leave the cities, roam the oceans, unknown lands, among wild beasts and composite beings. Every so often, it reappeared in the villages as the Wild Man. Pieter Brueghel paints him in one of his backgrounds with his hesitant paws and green pelt, as he advances toward a deceitful woman who tempts him with the offer of a ring. Behind him, an anonymous man points his crossbow to kill him—and the emperor holds up his sword. In the next scene, never portrayed by Brueghel or anyone else, the Wild Man is fatally wounded by the crossbow, with villagers surrounding him. A story invented by Boccaccio suggests that, in Venice, "a hunt is held in St. Mark's Square," where the prey is "a wild man," who appears "smeared all over with honey and covered with down feathers," with "a chain around his neck and a mask on his head," while bluebottles and gadflies swarm about him, attracted by the honey.[416] And thus sacrifice, though banished from society, was distilled into metaphor or moved back once more toward its origin: hunting. Now it would be evoked by the hiss of a deadly harpoon on the Ocean. It was left to wave-tossed ships to encounter the contagion of sacrifice. Generally one had to cross the line of the Equator and sail into the inverted world of the

southern hemisphere. A gleaming white albatross took off from the emerald light of the ice, a messenger of that place that was going to receive and capture the Ancient Mariner ("The ice was here, the ice was there, / The ice was all around").[417] The powers of sacrifice are concentrated in the mass of ice and they send off the albatross, for it to be received on the ship according to the laws of hospitality, a last vestige of sacrifice. But with the shot from the Ancient Mariner's crossbow that kills the albatross for no apparent reason, a reverse sacrifice takes place: Iphigenia had to be sacrificed to raise the wind, whereas here the killing of the albatross brings the air to a standstill. The ship stops and becomes spectral, captured by the immutability of literature, "as idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean."[418] The sea itself rots from its very depths. What had given dignity to the Ancient Mariner's gestures was his total whim. He was obeying neither a ritual nor even a cruel folk custom destined for the footnotes of a local scholar. Even the justification of the other sailors, who approve what he has done, since the albatross is said to be the harbinger of fog, is found to be *ex post*. The Ancient Mariner's gesture is the sudden murderous response to the flapping of the albatross's vast wings. In his automatic act, he cancels every past—and the past will return to haunt him, first as a curse, then as a gradual assimilation of the Ancient Mariner with the albatross, which he has now hung around his neck: and here memory returns to the origin, to the image of sacrifice as self-sacrifice, and thus of the killer as his own victim. The unexpected, unexplained shot from the Ancient Mariner's crossbow is the first absolute image of evil that would accompany a century of Satanism for ladies.

Coleridge wrote *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* following the advice of Thomas Burnet that is quoted at the beginning of the poem: "… *ne mens assuefacta hodiernae vitae se contrahat nimis, et tota subsidat in pusillas cogitationes*" "… so that the mind, preoccupied with everyday matters, does not shrink excessively and subside entirely into petty thoughts." Civilization had already culminated in that most fluid and narrow-minded century in which Coleridge had been born, and it was now beginning to feel the weight of its own clutter, of the mental dross forever babbling around it, whereas the Whole had been banished for its lack of taste and restraint. Like the Vedic gods in the beginning, Transcendental Subjects felt oppressed by the lack of space. Coleridge's albatross persuaded them that, wherever the

Whole became visible again, a rash impulse was driving them to kill it. But the albatross was still too much like a symbol on paper. It merely foretold the reemergence of the Whole. The Whole: the Whale! Then the white wings stretched out over the immense wrinkled brow of Moby Dick.

Once past the equator of history, what used to be silence needs to be said with violence, in every detail: indeed, this alone is to be said. Now it seems radiant and isolated. Just as Sade's loquacious protocol takes the place of the hierogamic cloud, so the slaughter of the whale replaces the brahmin's silence in front of the suffocated victim. Pornography has more to do with a theological task than with Eros: all that is hidden must be revealed, secret languages must once again be illegible—no longer because they are secret but because they are offered to the eyes of everyone, and are now almost a part of the landscape. *The 120 Days of Sodom* establishes a serial order, which is the closest approximation, in the combinatory sky of the concept, to the periodicity of the Zodiac. And the search for Moby Dick follows the cycle of the constellations until Ahab readies himself for the final act of his hunt, trampling angrily on the quadrant, the residual sign of dependence upon the sky. At the center of these two ungodly circles is the epiphany of killing. In Sade, the young girls tormented by licentious excesses are thrown by Minski, the Muscovite ogre, into a courtyard of wild animals, "where they are devoured in less than three minutes."[419] And Juliette, who watches, assures us: "Je n'ai de ma vie perdu de foutre plus lubriquement"—"Never in my life have I had such a lubricious orgasm."[420] Melville goes further. While Sade makes only a brief mention of wounded flesh, before returning straightaway to the atrocious, long-winded conversation, further *échauffée* by the entertainment, Melville raises literature to the level of the slaughterhouse, taking it over a threshold never before crossed, writing down on the page what we always knew was going on, but off-stage and never put into words. "The ivory *Pequod* was turned into what seemed a shamble; every sailor a butcher."[421] Literature had flourished out of sacrifice, but it had never described the act of butchery, always preferring to draw a labyrinthine garland around that void. With Melville, butchery indeed becomes the center of the book. The Taylorist factory, which Sade had earlier evoked in the ferocious pace of *The 120 Days of Sodom*, now reappears in the task of slaughtering the whale, described with eager attention like that of Marcel at the Guermantes ball,

but here carried out in the austral light, amid the stench and filth of the enormous carcass. Now, between the indifferent sea and sky, in the interminable vastness of the spaces, butchery, which in the city is hidden behind concrete walls, once again becomes a delicate severing of the cosmic elements: even the Arché becomes palpable, when the wild Indian Tashtego risks dying "smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum santorum of the whale." An image of the sweetest death, the fall "into Plato's honey head."[422] And so, at the end of the dissection, when the usable material has been extracted from the slain animal and its beheaded body is returned to the waters, what we finally see is something inexhaustible, indelible, a "white phantom" that no human blade could diminish, nor even the beaks of birds and the teeth of sharks that rival man in the "horrible vulturism of earth."[423] The headless white carcass floats away. Soon we will meet it again under the name Moby Dick: "The vast tackles have now done their duty.[424] The peeled white body of the beheaded whale flashes like a marble sepulcher; though changed in hue, it has not perceptibly lost anything in bulk. It is still colossal. Slowly it floats more and more away, the water around it torn and splashed by the insatiate sharks, and the air above vexed with rapacious flights of screaming fowls, whose beaks are like so many insulting poniards in the whale. The vast white headless phantom floats further and further from the ship, and every rod that it so floats, what seem square roods of sharks and cubic roods of fowls augment the murderous din. Beneath the unclouded and mild azure sky, upon the fair face of the pleasant sea, wafted by the joyous breezes, that great mass of death floats on and on, till lost in infinite perspectives."

Giorgio de Santillana wrote: "When Marcel Griaule, who showed us the unknown civilizations of western Sudan, asked his local experts to tell him something about the inhabited land, to describe what they knew about distant places, he was surprised to see them always pointing to the sky.[425] And finally he understood that for them the 'inhabited land' meant the area of the Ecliptic." That wonderful "finally he understood" refers also to Santillana himself: as an agile gentleman of Western culture he had spent decades pursuing the victorious pathways of science, and had seen them culminate between Galileo and Leibniz. And now, gazing at the Creatures of the Zodiac, oblique over the horizon, he realized that *pondus*, *numerus*,

mensura had previously illuminated and dominated another world, in an entirely different sense, beginning from a Zero Time that he tended to date back to when the equinoctial Sun rose in Gemini, around 5000 B.C.E. He began then to pursue the celestial paths of that other science, fondly collecting fragments from mythographers and from ancient singers. One day he reopened Ernst Cassirer's book on "symbolic forms," the great scholar's most detailed work, which had long been a guide for him. He realized that almost nothing in those pages remained valid. Something similar happened to Frances Yates: she had begun studying Giordano Bruno shortly before World War II, particularly because he belonged to the Italian Renaissance—two words that thrilled her, as they did many other young English devotees of culture. She had originally planned to translate *La cena de le ceneri* "with an introduction emphasizing the boldness with which this advanced philosopher of the Renaissance accepted the Copernican theory."[426] But there was something in that valiant knight of Modernity that she found unconvincing: "was the Copernican theory really the subject of the debate or was there something else implied in it?" She spent much time studying Bruno's mnemotechnical writings without being able to say what they were about.[427] When she finally grasped the *clavis*, she immediately saw the Beasts of the Zodiac emerge and conceal themselves on the wheels of memory. The oblique band of the Ecliptic once again revealed the stories that the Dogons read there: "Wanting to explore their geographic horizon, [Griaule] tried to discuss the inhabited lands, what these tribesmen knew about the world around them.[428] But soon he saw them once again pointing up, and showing him boundaries in the sky. And he realized that for them the idea of 'inhabited lands' referred to the area of stars between the two Tropics: a 47-degree band in the sky, lying on both sides of the Equator. Those are the true and only 'inhabitants.' "

Going back in history, we realize that guilt and evil recede more and more from the bad intentions of a single man and assume the august reality of numbers. Original sin becomes a mathematical and divine fact, an occurrence *in coelestibus*, like all occurrences that are worthy of discussion. Measured in time, there are three forms of the evil, of the guilt, of the irresolvable disorder that accompanies us. And here is the probable sequence in which they were discovered:

Obliquity of the Ecliptic (in the *chi*—χ—formed by the Demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, the Ecliptic is the axis of the Other, in respect of the Equator, which is the axis of the Same; the obliquity of the Ecliptic brings the drama of the seasons, now removed from the eternal, symmetrical balance of the equinoxes, which we would have if the angles were *correct*, right angles: that drama will be the basis for every rise and fall, for every adventure, for every journey; it is the original disorder of the world);

Precession of the Equinoxes (it reveals evil even more clearly, insofar as it is that retrograde movement, left to itself, that takes advantage of divine weariness, as Plato brutally explained in his *Statesman*: "Listen then.[429] At certain moments the god guides all of this in its rotating course; but at other moments, when the allotted periods of time have reached their measure, he lets it go, and then everything starts rotating on its own in the reverse direction, since it is a living creature and has received intelligence from he who fashioned it in the beginning. Now this disposition to retrograde movement is an inherent part of its nature"—and this is because "the being we call heaven and earth," however hard it tries, cannot be entirely free from change and so it has been given that "retrograde circular movement that deviates as little as possible from its own movement."[430, 431] A consequence of these two contrary cosmic movements is the division of time into different eras through the continuous, slow shift of the celestial points of reference, hence the succession of worlds that burst into flames or are submerged by water);

Incommensurability of $\sqrt{2}$ (Simone Weil described it as "the drama of incommensurables": but she added that the outrageousness of this discovery, "far from being a defeat for the Pythagoreans, as is so innocently imagined, is their most marvelous triumph": she uses the image of a pair of scales with, on one dish, two cubes of side 1 and, on the other, one cube whose side is equal to the diagonal of the other two: equilibrium is impossible and *no* weight, whether added or removed, will ever make it possible).[432, 433]

Sacrifice recognizes the noncorrespondence between discrete and continuous; but at the same time it recognizes the necessary bond between the discrete and the continuous: the bond is the victim. The victim fills the gap between the discrete and the continuous. But, precisely because it fills it, it has to be destroyed. And the world then returns to marking itself out in parallel series of the discrete and the continuous—the wheel divided into 360 segments, gods, days, degrees, goes on rotating above the solid wheel of Vṛtra.

Guilt, and eventually Christian sin, descend from ritual inexactitude like the cadet branch of a noble family. Ritual is the *kairòs* that extends over every portion of time. This heightened precision, this keen perception of order, outside which every delay and every hesitation is guilt—the evil to which all evil can be traced—arises from a long, desolate exploration of experience: in no part of it had anything identical or perfectly regular ever appeared. Only certain minuscule points in the heavens moved along

unchanging paths. *That* was order. All the more disturbing was the discovery that, there too, something was not quite right—or rather, it was right but had slightly moved, by reason of the Precession. Or else it was the calendar calculations that left something over, an unexplained lump of time: an excess that, here too, had to be dealt with in some way. The accursed share was nesting among the celestial spheres.

There are two kinds of substitution: one says *a stands for b*, and implies that *a* cancels *b*, it kills it, sometimes to discover how it works; the other says: *a stands for b*, but in the same way that a fragment of granite stands for the mountain from which it has been separated. In these two kinds of substitution there is a Y-shaped fork that had long wandered in the cosmos and is now portrayed in the amygdala of the mind. The symbol—not that of the linguists but that of the Mysteries—belongs to the second kind of substitution, always returning to superimpose itself on an invisible mountain. The fact that the symbol is a discontinuous ripple forever facing the continuous is made clear in the origin of its name: *symbolon* is the putting together of two broken halves of a piece of wood or pottery; in this way it returns to being a smooth and solid surface, barely incised by a crack across it. More than substitution, to which it must nevertheless pay homage, the symbol reveals interpenetration, the indissoluble superimposition of things: symbol is a specter that enters another specter, mingles with it, merges into it, disappears. The symbol drags behind it, as a *catena aurea*, all that it has crossed.

Everything changes according to whether or not one accepts the "sacrificial interpretation of life," a formula tucked away in a short review by Guénon in *Études traditionnelles* of a paper by Ananda Coomaraswamy. According to that interpretation, "actions, having an essentially symbolic character, have to be treated as supports to contemplation (*dhiyālamba*), which presupposes that every practice implies and includes a corresponding theory."[434] Every practice, every gesture, voluntary or involuntary: what is indeed more sacrificial than breathing? Every instant is now being held in an invisible clamp that forces it into a perpetual oblation. But, if nothing is offered, if sacrifice is discounted as a superstition, what will happen? "Revolution, through sacrifice, confirms superstition," warns Baudelaire.[435] Without being named, sacrifice continues to demand its victims, once again

it's nomadic and moves its places of worship everywhere. Why? Perhaps reason, which has banned sacrifice, is not powerful enough to stamp it out? Or is it perhaps the case, as Baudelaire claimed, that "superstition is the depository of all truths"—and truths come out in the end, like the traces of a crime?[436]

The threefold deception of sacrifice. There is a deception toward the gods, through the substitution of the victim; there is a deception toward the victim: the knife is concealed among ears of corn, for it is feared to the very end that the victim might rebel; there is a deception toward men on the part of the gods, who demand the sacrifice so that life may be guaranteed—and yet, in the act of sacrifice, they allow death to be confirmed.

The rice thrown at newlyweds can be traced back to the grains of barley scattered over the victim, which can be traced back to the stoning of the victim, the safest way of killing, since there is no need to even touch the victim.

The step from sacrifice to experiment. Sacrifice: all is based on the presumption of an Other, of many invisible Others, who respond to the *right action*. That which is offered, irrevocably, is equivalent to declaring a willingness to listen, the expectation of an answer, that ought to be constantly repeated. Experiment: based on the presumption that the *right action* occurs through accumulation. A thousand actions are tried out, in uncertainty and in the dark, only one of which will be the *right action*. All the others, with the wastage of energy they entail, are lost, in homage to an unknown entity. The application of the *right action* to the world, the possibility of perpetually repeating it, will then lead to a growth of power that corresponds to life heightened by sacrifice.

People criticized Guénon for writing like a bookkeeper of metaphysics, with no enthusiasm, with no heart. They thought he lacked inspiration. But Guénon was simply obeying "the esoteric, and more particularly the Rosicrucian precept according to which it was better to talk to every person in their own language."[437]

Let us erase the names of gods, founding myths, ritual precepts: what is left of the sacrifice? The difference between the discrete and the continuous,

between rational numbers and real numbers—and the recognition that continuous and discrete have to remain linked.

The perception on which every mythology is based: the cycle. And the cycle is written in the heavens, in the return of the constellations. The terror of killing is, above all, a terror that there is no cycle, that the animal will not return, that the star will not reappear. The slight disorder we observe in the heavens (obliquity of the Ecliptic, Precession of the Equinoxes) corresponds to the immense disorder on earth (death).

Technology takes the place not of magic but of sacrifice. Like sacrifice, it is first and foremost a way of controlling danger, which means not just violent conflict within society, but the destructive and self-destructive power within life itself. Plague stands for the conflict between men in the same way that conflict between men stands for plague. Sacrifice requires perfect awareness of destruction: if this clear-sighted attention is missing, there is no sacrifice. For technology it's enough to justify with claims about its practical utility.

Bureaucratic procedures are used in Kafka not to throw light on some degenerating state of the law, but on its first emergence, its first emergence from the marshy waters, when the abstract and the arbitrary shone in all their extraneousness in the face of Nature, which in those same times became the Village and agreed to serve at the inn the tired lords who, now and then, came down from the Castle.

The "force field between the Torah and the Tao," which was how Walter Benjamin described Kafka's place, was also Benjamin's own place.[438] But it certainly wasn't a psychological or speculative place: it was the saturnine residence, the celestial area, in which *ṛta* and the "hidden ocean" coexist, where the Law is submerged in the fluidity of the Waters. On the bottom lies *xvarnah*, the radiance of Glory, exiled in the world, which Benjamin recognized in the *aura*.

In a letter to Robert Klopstock, Kafka proposes two versions of the story of Abraham: "I can imagine another Abraham, who surely would never manage to become a patriarch, or even a ragman: this Abraham would be as prompt as a waiter to comply with the request for the sacrifice, but he

would still never manage to perform the sacrifice because he can't get away from home, he is indispensable; he is needed to run the house, there's always something to be looked after, the house is not in order, but if the house is not in order he cannot leave until it's sorted out, the Bible itself confirms it, for it says: 'He set his house in order' and Abraham already had an abundance of everything; if he hadn't had a house, where would he have brought up his son, and on what beam would he have placed the knife?

… … …

"And then another Abraham. One who really wants to carry out the sacrifice in the right way and has rightly understood the meaning of it all, but cannot believe it's really up to him, this repulsive old man and his son, that dirty youth. He has no lack of true faith, such faith he has, he would sacrifice in the right state of mind, if only he could believe it was really up to him. He's worried about setting off by horse as Abraham with his son, but being transformed along the way into Don Quixote. The world would then be horrified if it had seen Abraham, yet this Abraham fears the world would die of laughter at seeing him. But it is not the ridiculous in itself that he fears—or rather, he fears that as well, especially of everyone laughing together—but above all he fears that such ridicule will make him even older and more repulsive, and his son dirtier, even more unworthy to be called. An Abraham who comes without being called! It's rather as though the best student had to solemnly receive a prize at the end of the school year and in the midst of the silence of anxious expectation the worst student came forward from his dirty back bench, because he'd misheard his name, and then the whole class bursts out laughing. And perhaps he hadn't even heard wrongly, perhaps his name had actually been called out and it's the teacher who wants the award for the best also to be a punishment for the worst.

"Terrible things … That's enough."[439]

In a letter to Gershom Scholem, a few months before his death, Walter Benjamin referred to his final discovery on Kafka: "… I think that the key to Kafka would fall into the hands of the one who is able *to extract from Jewish theology its comic aspects*.[440] Has there ever been such a man? or perhaps you could be him?"

Rancé remarked in his letters, with his usual bluntness, that we must all think of ourselves as sheep to the slaughter, *tanquam oves occisionis*. Victor

Hugo: “The gospel makes God a shepherd.[441] The Trappist makes him a butcher.” But shepherds, who protect their flock, gradually slaughter them. The secular practice of euphemism, exemplified here by Hugo, offers only an idyllic image of the shepherd. To someone (like Hugo) who is placed outside sacrifice, no criticism of sacrifice can undermine the obligation to kill, which remains, unspoken, with its power intact. Only certain Altaic peoples, shepherds and farmers who practice sacrifice, have been able to transform the most radical criticism of sacrifice into ceremony. “It was the custom of the Tatars of the Minusinsk region to sacrifice a *live* horse to the god of thunder.[442] After stopping to pray at the place of sacrifice, they remove the horse’s reins and let it run away. From then on, the horse is free and cannot be touched. The Buryats also place a bowl of milk on the back of these animals consecrated to the thunder. The priest officiating at the sacrifice sprinkles milk over the animal’s back, and at the same time in the four celestial directions. He has the horse censed with burning grass and the bark of a resinous tree, then ties ribbons to its mane, and finally the horse is sent off into freedom. At the place where the bowl of milk falls from the horse’s back, prayers are given for health and success. From that moment, an animal consecrated in this way is no longer used for the service of man. When the animal dies, its mane and its tail are cut off and tied to another horse, which must then substitute the previous one.” The untying of the knot of life, which takes place with the killing of the dressed sacrificial victim, can only be opposed with equivalent force by another untying: that of the reins of the captive horse, which frees life into life. But this, which is the only adequate opposition to the sacrifice, occurs within the sacrifice itself, it treads the same ground, wears the same ribbons, repeats the same gestures to the very end: the hands that were about to carry out the strangling now carry out the gesture of untying the reins. The horse vanishes into the taiga, or continues to follow the herd, but as if it were invisible, since no one can touch it and least of all use it. No one can sell it, no one can buy it. That white horse is the Double of all horses, which grace permits to be seen beside the others: but the Double cannot be used, the Double can only be unleashed. On the site where the reins have been removed, everything remains as if the lifeless body of the victim were present: the smoke of spruce lingers in the air, since this is a place governed by the principle “there is no smoke without god,” the milk bowl has fallen to the ground, showing divine favor or disfavor according to how it lies.[443]

Even the ribbons on its mane camouflage the freed horse as the sacrificial victim. But there is a final vertiginous step, with which the ceremony of the consecrated horse responds to the metaphysics of the sacrifice: when the freed horse dies, its mane and tail are cut off and attached to the one that *substitutes* it. This is the heart of the sacrifice: substitution—and this mortal machine is reversed in a pledge of eternal life: by substituting one for the other, the white horses, over the course of the generations, are like a single one, which never dies. This is the extreme point at which sacrifice has been reversed: achieved in a remote time, in an area of Asia dotted with shamanic relics, where white horses are consecrated to the thunder. The next step has never been taken. No man has ever felt the hands of other men untying the invisible reins that are strapped around his neck. No one has ever been totally freed from the use of other men. And the fact of "being used for the service of man" is steeped in the poison of exchange, which slowly, or sometimes abruptly, kills.

The Antiromantic Child

There are certain fools endowed with genius whose every sentence vibrates, almost unwittingly, with a fateful metaphysical resonance. They are delegated by a whole civilization with the task of making certain crucial and authoritative pronouncements that no one else wishes to express in such blunt terms. For us, such a man was Jeremy Bentham, a true hero of *Ahnungslosigkeit*, a man with no perception of the Powers:

"Directly or indirectly, *well-being*, in one shape or other, or in several shapes, or all shapes taken together, is the subject of every thought, and the object of every action, on the part of every known *Being*, who is, at the same time, a sensitive and thinking Being."[444]

"Money is the instrument of measuring the quantity of pain or pleasure. Those who are not satisfied with the accuracy of this instrument must find

out some other that shall be more accurate or bid adieu to politics and morals.

"Let no man therefore be either surprised or scandalized if he find me in the course of his work valuing everything in money.[445] 'Tis in this way only can we get aliquot parts to measure by. If we must not say of a pain or a pleasure that it is worth so much money, it is in vain, in point of quantity, to say anything at all about it, there is neither proportion nor disproportion between Punishments and Crimes."

"The only common measure the nature of things affords is money."[446]

"I beg a truce here of our man of sentiment and feeling while from necessity, and it is only from necessity, I speak and prompt mankind to speak a mercenary language."[447]

"Now then, money being the current instrument of pleasure, it is clear by uncontroverted experience, that the quantity of actual pleasure follows in every instance in some proportion or other the quantity of money."[448] This proportionality between money and pleasure is declared, only for it to be explained immediately after that it cannot be precisely determined:

"In large sums the ratio of pleasure to pleasure is in this way less than a ratio of money to money.[449] There is no limit beyond which the quantity of money cannot go: but there are limits, and those comparatively narrow, beyond which pleasure cannot go."

We are therefore faced with the paradox of a unit of measure expressed with complete certainty, but which cannot in fact be applied each time, since the variation of circumstances also continually varies the proportion between the two series (money and pleasure). And if a law can be established in such a correspondence, it will be that which states a different *ratio* in the progression between the two series.

The crucial steps:

a) to establish the need for a unit of measure;

b) to express it in money;

c) to trace the limited back to the unlimited.

Bentham destroys the correspondence, observing the different ratio between the two series, but reaffirming it immediately after: with this device he excludes all areas where the problem of limit arises (the *great*

pleasures and the *great* sums) in order to suggest that the *normal*, regular, and legal range is precisely that where the proportion is still respected, hence the range of *small* pleasures and *small* sums: "For all of this, it is true enough for practice with respect to such proportions [*variant*: small quantities] as ordinarily occur, that *ceteris paribus* the proportion between pleasure and pleasure is the same as between sum and sum."[450] For society to be well ordered, it will have to regard *great* pleasures as hostile and troublesome in relation to the whole. But not because they conceal the power of the unlimited. On the contrary: because they would compel us to recognize that the power of the unlimited is concealed in money itself.

John Stuart Mill, who was the first guinea pig of a strictly Benthamite education, entirely regulated by the calculation of utility, did not react with lavish delirium, as would happen in a similar situation to Judge Schreber. On the contrary, he managed to write a magnanimous essay on Bentham. His words are guided by a display of respect, along with lucidity, but they inadvertently reveal more than they claim. Meanwhile he offers us the most appropriate definition of the Master, presenting him as "the great subversive" and, in particular, "the chief subversive thinker of an age which has long lost all that they could subvert."[451, 452] Bentham was the first living *tabula rasa*, an obtuse, insolent child who could harbor no doubts since he had no experience (nor would he acquire any). "He had neither internal experience, nor external; the quiet, even tenor of his life, and his healthiness of mind, conspired to exclude him from both.[453] He never knew prosperity and adversity, passion nor satiety: he never had even the experiences which sickness gives; he lived from childhood to the age of eighty-five in boyish health. He knew no dejection, no heaviness of heart. He never felt life a sore and a weary burthen. He was a boy to the last. Self-consciousness, that daemon of the men of genius of our time, from Wordsworth to Byron, from Goethe to Chateaubriand, and to which this age owes so much both of its cheerful and its mournful wisdom, never was awakened in him. How much of human nature slumbered in him he knew not, neither can we know. He had never been made alive to the unseen influences which were acting on himself, nor consequently on his fellow-creatures." With Bentham, the antiromantic child, a genuine *new man* was born: one who knows nothing, calculates everything, and in the end resolves everything.

Bentham is the happy autodidact. The calculation of pleasures erases the incalculable past, with its pack of ghosts that disrupt the sums and subtractions. But watertight cases like his are unusual. More frequently the autodidact is afflicted by a sinister awe, like that of Auguste Blanqui imprisoned at the Fort du Taureau, who projects the cosmos into his mind, sees that "the forms are countless, the elements are the same" and the cosmos is therefore a jumble of duplicates.[454]

Where there is no initiation, there is the autodidact. Anyone for whom knowledge is not wisdom transmitted through experience is enrolled in a university that is a correspondence course.

E***: Our fate is governed by two mummies: that of Lenin in his mausoleum and that of Bentham at University College, London.

Limits

The history of the Enlightenment lightly rejects limit. Since its god is convention, since everything is material on which convention works, it is a question at most of changing the convention each time resistance is met. But all conventions have a shared *faith* in convention itself—and the material can one day rebel against that very faith. Then the limit reappears, by now an exotic figure, unveiled and venerated in Greece even while the first procedures were being devised to cancel it. Today we have it before us once more: it is the most disturbing of figures, the most ambiguous of memories. Simone Weil was the only one who clearly recognized its proper name. Anyone who hasn't recognized it in thought is forced to see it emerge from events, translated and disguised in the jargon of systems, complexity, control. Or otherwise in the concern over a material that is disappearing, a power irreversibly worn down, an unfillable absence. And each time the ancient exorcism rings out: we will find new conventions, we will carry out drastic changes in method. The circle repeats itself, but ever narrower, until it tightens in a noose.

The exchange society is based on breaking the limit, but it does not accept that state of natural fragmentation in which it finds itself from moment to moment. It does not accept it since it considers the point of reference to be the whole. It doesn't matter that the picture is continually a different one: what matters is that there is always a frame, and that the frame, as far as possible, remains the same. Otherwise the pictures would flood the passageways. And so one passes from the complete and imperfectible totality of the canon to a totality that frames every fragment as its *télos*: every fragment would be temporary, awaiting the promised prospect of a whole that would redeem it. Progress: an idea that is weak and almost innocuous in its helplessness, if behind it, once again, there were not yet again the looming outline of totality, which imposes a tight, uncontrollable, greedy bond on a reality that operates through a continual severing of bonds.

The transition from the world of the canon to that of convention is achieved by substituting the "sacred limit" with the "barrier," as Marx explained in his *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (*Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*).[455] Changing a set of doctrines means changing a world. Changing a convention means reaching different results inside the same world. And the results are compared on the basis of their efficiency in terms of development. Violating the "sacred limit" means abandoning an order that is social because it is the order of the world. Breaking down a "barrier" means putting forward a new procedure.

Monsieur le Capital creates an artificial nature, which claims to be more natural than nature. Through credit, capital creates the illusion that it is capable of continuous self-generation, as opposed to being a hobbled, periodical self-generation—like that of nature. The crisis that affects capital is in fact *cyclical*, it is Madame la Terre who makes her presence felt and destroys the sham of artificial nature. Here again, capital shows its aspect of explicit esotericism: continuous self-generation is the end result of initiation. But *inversion* requires it to be declared as an immediate reality and immediately perceptible.

Capital is defined by Marx as an uninterrupted breaking down of barriers —"where advance beyond the point of departure is the only

presupposition."[456] At the same time Marx lies in wait for the (approaching) moment when capital will reach its own limit. But what is the *limit* for something that is perpetually breaking down *limits*? Marx, despite all his roaring vituperation, could barely hide his deepest fear: the fear that there was *no* such limit. And the same fear emerged, much more innocently, in Rosa Luxemburg's indignation against Mikhail Tugan-Baranovsky: "Assuming the accumulation of capital to be without limits, one has obviously proved the unlimited capacity of capitalism to survive."[457] Indeed, entirely absent in Marx's speculative system was *péras*, or any other strict notion of *limit*. Development, by definition, appeared undefined. Indeed, it was that very assumption of constant movement that aroused sudden outbursts of lyricism. And once again it would be Luxemburg who displays them in their most exposed and transparent form: "This would be tangible proof that the capitalist mode of production, alleged to spur on technology to its highest achievements, in fact sets large social limits to technical progress, in form of the profit motive on which it is based.[458] It would show that as soon as these limits are abolished, technical progress will develop such a powerful drive that the technical marvels of capitalist production will be child's play in comparison." The *bad* breaking down of limits would then be counterbalanced by another one, which is *good* and unrestrainable. Capitalism and socialism, quarrelsome and cheeky infants, play the same game, though with bitter clashes of style, "twin and rival forms of a single identical faith."[459]

Process

We can make this word mean what Adorno and Horkheimer called *Aufklärung*, what Nietzsche called *Nihilismus*, what Heidegger called *Nihilismus* and *Metaphysik*, what Marx called *Kapital*, what Monsieur Homais called *progrès*, what Guénon called *règne de la quantité*, what Freud called *Unbehagen der Kultur*, what Spengler (and Wittgenstein) called *Zivilisation*. So comprising as well the slow movement of the

absolutes Wissen described by Hegel ("because the self has to penetrate and digest the entire richness of its substance").[460] This means carving out of world history a picture of Western history, inside which a sequence of events and transformations is acted out, in laboratory conditions. It is not clearly understood how the sequence begins, or how it ends. There is, however, considerable agreement—though based on differing terms and valuations—about the various transitions that happen within the sequence, in a chain reaction. Transitions observable in each area. Chopin and the merchant bank.

That which still remains to be understood: a process that certainly has a direction of its own, and this direction has a sign, but that sign is not a plus or a minus, as Condorcet and Joseph de Maistre respectively would have liked, but a sign similar to a bronze Shang animal, which includes within it many other animals, including Condorcet's plus and Joseph de Maistre's minus, though now linked, intertwined, incorporated into many other signs that are hard to interpret. And it is this composite sign, at variance in each of its parts, that we are called upon to decipher.

What is the first negation of the whole? A negation that negates not a detail but a characteristic of the whole: interdependence. This step leads to those that follow: once the interdependence of the whole is negated, the world remains divided into bigger or lesser aggregates, more or less stable, from which—now and then—individual elements break away to become autonomous.

This process in which elements *become autonomous*, avoiding authority and the looming context—this is the process which for several decades was called "nihilism." Like a gradual release of isolated substances from a compound of which they are a part. And, once released, those elements also act *upon* the compound. Above all, they act in one respect: they contribute to its further breakdown.

Glosses on Marx

Marx's perpetual ambivalence to modernity becomes clear as soon as the argument turns to the ancient world. Here, as we are already accustomed to the fury of Marx's moralizing thunderbolts on the depravity around him, we expect to find him more calm and relaxed. But this is not the case—indeed it is precisely here that he expresses his greatest misgivings: "Thus the old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production, regardless of his limited national, religious, political character, seems to be very lofty when contrasted to the modern world, where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production."[461] But it only "seems" more noble and lofty, since Marx has a clear intolerance to it; and certainly not for the same sentimental reasons (due, for example, to the old world being founded on slavery), but because that world lacks power and, above all, because it is not built in such a way that its operation necessarily and automatically exalts power regardless of the direction in which it is applied. "Wealth," indeed, if observed in terms of its physiology, is far *richer* (and far more *interesting*!) than the service that man devotes to man in the ancient world, where "the question is always which mode of property creates the best citizens."[462] The bourgeois world of wealth is certainly not much concerned about creating virtuous citizens. If anything, it extends the *comédie humaine* to every kind of monstrosity, but in return "when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away [and Marx here, in officer's uniform, visits the cocotte in her room and finally glimpses, behind the flimsy screen, her ancient—and, more than ancient, her modern![463]—sweetly veiled nudity], what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature?" Here, having banished all shyness, Marx at last declares his innermost feelings: antiquity, yes, fine statues, fine lines of verse, heroes, tombs and columns, etc.; but how poor and feeble if we think of the majesty of bourgeois wealth, of the irresistible abstractions from which it grows, of its vast warehouses, which are only seemingly filled with mere things: on closer inspection they contain the phantoms of ever-growing needs,

pleasures, qualities, powers, gathered together in a pulsating and expanding nebula. Above all, we have to remember, Marx is greedy. He wants *more* of everything. He is suspicious of quality unless it is simply the mark of greater quantity: even if quality could exist alone, it would always be less admirable than a quantity in continual prospect of increase. Marx's heart beats here: it is not like that of Schiller, who dreams of belonging to a worthy community, of overcoming divisiveness, of rediscovering blades of grass. No: here it is the pride of full "mastery," mastery over "so-called nature," and then the moment will also come for humanity to sort out its "own nature." This is a promise of power, this is the intoxication of the Nothing that moves the machine, an inexhaustible fuel, the unleashing of forces! And even the idea of a process that is an end in itself, which Marx has branded with contempt over hundreds of pages of analysis as being a supreme corruption of the mercantile world—well, even this now seems much more exciting than the "childish," limited, even if well-meaning, world of antiquity.

This is how Marx continues, after the phrase on "human mastery over the forces of nature": "[What is wealth if not] the absolute working-out of [man's] creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e., the development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as measured on a *predetermined* yardstick?[464] Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality?" Here we see the reappearance of an old obsession: the unit of measure. But the situation is once again reversed: the ancient world had, indeed, as a point of reference, a human *canon*, and this would seem to be a utopian condition of society, that it possess within itself a degree of perfection; the modern world, on the other hand, has no real use for perfection: its only unit of measurement is work-time, where work is abstract, an empty unit, devoid of any particular feature, but it is this very unit that enables mankind to *produce* (and note: not *reproduce*!) itself to an extent unknown in any other world. It is clear, at this point, which part, which side, Marx chooses: speaking here, almost brutally, is his love of modernity, of its capacity to multiply and enhance itself without a plan, in any direction. For its only purpose is *everything*: the immediate possession of everything, not just a precept that *corresponds* to everything. To reach totality, elements can be accumulated anywhere, in attics, cellars, drawing rooms. Good and bad, everything is useful, provided

it comes in large quantities. Humanity becomes a vast port where spices and foreign produce arrive. No order is required: the only thing needed is for everything to continue multiplying to saturation point.

And when there's everything? Then humanistic concerns and sensitivities will reemerge: the man who fishes in the morning and plays his flute in the evening, the "omnilateral" man who proudly refuses to let any of his countless tentacles remain idle. Yet, here again, a nasty surprise is waiting to spoil any *image d'Épinal.* This total man—as Stirner recognized immediately—far from being the virtuous worker, trained in technical schools and in the factory, was destined to blossom into the total, celestial and infernal monstrosity oscillating between Juliette's Minski and Dostoyevsky's Myshkin. All the rest is humanitarian kitsch, closer to Homais than to Fourier (though the two, in fact, are not so far apart).

Elsewhere, however, Marx shows his passion: elsewhere we feel his full transparent fervor: before the demonic nature of the *process*. It is the process—certainly not its result—that fascinates. The construction of the power of the void. And here the fundamental opposition between the two worlds reemerges. Let us reread the last sentence of the passage quoted above: the totality of development in which man "does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality." The ultimate opposition is therefore between *reproducing* and *producing*. *Reproduce* is the word that belongs to the world of the canon, dominated by rituals that seek each time to restore an order to the process, to *reproduce* an order, that of the *ṛta*, which sustains the cosmos as well as society. *Produce* is the word that belongs to the world of hegemonic exchange, where it is essential to establish a functional strategy such that the process, as it proceeds, carries with it—come what may—an increase of power. This happens precisely because the direction of production is *not* determinable and is indeed ignored, whereas all concern is focused primarily on the intensification and expansion of production strategies. And it is only in their evolution that any consequence can be gleaned.

The world of production knows no models and sets itself no limits. For its limit can only be everything. From the maximum fragmentation, caused by the absence of models, it seeks to move toward maximum unity, which is that of an everything fully and immediately possessed—and this claim to totality lingers, like a phantom, over every movement of the process, not

least because the lack of totality gives rise to a peculiar angst. That lingering phantom, that temporary remedy, is Kitsch.

("In bourgeois economics—and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds—this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end.[465] This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as a superior world. On the other side, it actually is superior wherever one is seeking the closed figure, form, and a set limit. It is satisfaction from a limited standpoint; while the modern gives no satisfaction; or, where it appears satisfied with itself, it is *vulgar*." Beware, tread with caution: here, perhaps, we are getting close to one of the grand secrets of kitsch: an art of the limited and of the canonical, of measures tuned to a cosmic order, conceals instead a corrosive, "reckless" movement. "Vulgar" is something that sees the fragment as totality, that rests in the fragment with an expression of satisfaction, firmness, legality: then the simoom of the relentless *haine du bourgeois* rises up to reap revenge. And yet art has always been accompanied by kitsch! Yes, but, in order to fix its shadow, the process had to expand across the whole planet—the couple embracing in front of the sunset had to make up for the absence of a model. Ancient kitsch suggests an even deeper secret: the guilt inherent in anything whatsoever that becomes image, the reverberation of the violence of giving a name.)

Marx, looking at the origins, wavered between two visions of the earth: as an "extension of the body" of man, or as his "great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labor."[466] They are the two opposite modes that we continually encounter in thought: on the one hand, the analogical chain of symbolic correspondences by which the earth is enveloped as soon as it is regarded as an "extension of the body" of man (and this is seen from the way in which, despite constant secularization, terms like "heart," "brain," "flesh" are still symbolic poles); on the other hand, the dissociation hailed by the Enlightenment, the experimental use of everything, the absence of assumptions: this is the image of the "great workshop." But Marx's attention (and his passion) are always directed toward the second pole. He regards the existence of the first as obvious, but

clearly finds it too tedious to specify its characteristics: for him it is enough to posit a condition of *belonging*, both at the beginning and—but here it is more embarrassing—at the end; and to suppose a considerable number of states of *separation* in all that occurs between these two phases. Marx examines these with tireless, whirling rapture, always referring eloquently to something lost or to be regained. But his eloquence comes to a halt—and he becomes distracted—as soon as the opportunity arises to specify exactly what has been lost, exactly what might be regained. None of this means that Marx has given two incompatible descriptions of the origins of the "earth": they are, indeed, discordant and contradictory, but have always coexisted in history: one is the latency of the other. Marx displays all his personal acumen in placing them *together*. This is because the euhemeristic gesture, the severing of correspondences, always operates even where the order of analogies is established. Indeed, that order can be considered as a conciliatory *response*, a suturing of correspondences, which ritually follows every act of severing.

"Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history.[467] The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible supposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities. In earlier stages of development the single individual seems to be developed more fully, because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers and relations opposite himself. It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that primal fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end." This passage contains a celebration of the metaphysical function of capital that magnificently outstrips all others that we know. No other apologists have Marx's farsightedness—nor do they dare attribute such evocative power to the activities they are defending. The Universal, this spoiled firstborn of the

bourgeois age, is indeed said to be born out of "production on the basis of exchange values"—and from nothing else. Marx disdains the communal relations of all previous phases (even if he is prepared to shed a hypocritical tear for the lost "primal fullness"), since he knows they are fatally limited, *bornés*. And narrow-mindedness, *Borniertheit*, for Marx, is the supreme defect, worse than all emptiness: it is the permanent threat, the hostile memory of the ghetto.

"Primal fullness" is not *polútropos*, it is not "omnilateral," according to Marx (but is Ulysses "primal," or not? A question still without an answer). At the other end of history we see—at a time of maximum prosperity—that the essence of the bourgeois individual is certainly universal, but at the same time totally empty, vacuous, hollow, the result of a relentless process of emptying. The anthropological question has to be posed then in these terms: what to do with this "total emptiness," without resorting to some fatuous appeal to the lost "primal fullness" (and here Marx seeks to dismiss in one sarcastic phrase all reactionary criticism, great and small, of the bourgeoisie)?

At this point the apparatus of dialectics, in all its sham intrusiveness, seems once again enormously helpful. Progress will refill what progress has emptied. People will talk about "universal development of individuals" rather than production ratios. In place of a real emptiness a vacuous expression is thus used which nevertheless matches the feeling of an age that liked more than anything else the rule "do it yourself." Avoiding certain questions is all that is required, but what if the specific object (the singular thing) stubbornly refuses? And what if the universal is prepared to exist only in conditions of perfect emptiness? Hegel has already performed a masterful sleight of hand around these points. Marx would now repeat it, more abruptly and with far less knowledge of the history of philosophy. And it would be performed again and again, in an ever more brutal way, by unpropitious descendants, itinerant cadres of the Third International or the heirs of some Black Byzantium that breathe the sacrificial fumes of polytechnic schools while waiting to transform their savanna into a bloody murder scene from Roussel, to mark the beginning of a belated entry into History.

(The well-tempered crudeness of this doctrine guarantees the kind of survival that involves a threat to anyone who doesn't pay homage to it. It is

a special kind of *programmed* crudeness, adjusted according to the circumstances. This concept is certainly crude, but it is procedural, in the double legal and physical sense of the word. It assists the general process of what exists by subjecting it, among other things, to a *procès*, to a trial. The justice of history, which—if the moment is right—can also become "revolutionary justice," is a valuable expedient for setting in motion the procedures of practice. The theory not only gave new theoretical dignity to praxis, but it was already praxis in action, and obviously disguised as Science: here the word *materialism*, with the double sneer—historical and dialectical—of the herm, offered an invaluable service.)

Marx doesn't always abandon all restraint in his worship of progress. Behind that word can be seen changes of stance. There are moments when he is caught off guard and comes perilously close to establishing a break between the two modes of development, one corrupt (that of capital) and one good (what follows after capital).

Society, based on exchange value, having reached its completeness, is defined as follows: "Each individual possesses social power under the form of a thing [exchange value]."[468] In the next phrase, the revolutionary leap is set down in its simplest terms: "Rob the thing of this social power and you must give it to persons to exercise over persons."[469] This is perfectly consistent with the view of Louis Dumont: if the prime characteristic of modernity (but there are so many *prime* characteristics!) was to give preeminence to man's relationship with things—contrary to what occurred in all other societies, built above all on relationships between humans—then departure from the order of exchange value will also mean a return to the preeminence of the relationship between humans. And here Marx gives one of the many formulations of the stages of society that we will not find in the Marxist-Leninist textbooks. Here in fact, the conceptual articulations clearly emerge:

a: "Relations of personal dependence (entirely spontaneous at the outset) are the first social forms, in which human productive capacity develops only to a slight extent and at isolated points."[470] Characteristics: "relations of personal dependence," as a crucial element, regardless of relations with things. And here the dependence is entrusted to what is *naturwüchsig*, spontaneous—solitary growth, forests and swamps. Development "only to a slight extent": here, development has a limit, a preestablished extent, and in

any event it does not include all exchanges: *outside*, there are, there may be, other modalities.

b: "Personal independence founded on dependence *on things* is the second major form, in which a system of general social metabolism, of universal relations, of omnilateral needs and universal capacities is formed for the first time."[471] The individual is a category that is developed during this phase: "individual" means relations of independence from other subjects. But on one condition: that these relationships coincide with a total dependence on things: "Individuals are subsumed under social production; social production exists outside them as their fate."[472] This fate that is embodied by the pure existence of things is now called "social production." It therefore consists of things and their production. Here, in comparison to form *a*, we see a departure from the provincial context, an expansion of boundaries as far as the universal, total, general, in contrast to the singularity of the individual.

c: "Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth, is the third stage."[473] This time, therefore, there is a further reversal of the relationship between things and people, bringing things (and hence "productivity") to a state of subordination. And here the noose is tightened: productivity ought to give way to another form of productivity, now described as "universal development of individuals." But what lies hidden behind this formula for proud freethinkers? Production—the age-old name for this august, sacred *development* of Humanity—suggests just one path: to treat humanity itself as "human material." What will the nascent "omnilateral" man be? He will be a parody of Anthropos: a progressive Anthropos, an appalling hybrid between Monsieur Homais and the alchemical Homunculus, produced by the application of one model (that of productivity as indefinite growth) to the ever more "universal" subjects of society. They will be the only subjects that perpetually *improve* themselves! And we should remember that *improvement* was the word Adam Smith used to indicate "development." On this extremely delicate point Marx always promises some explanation, though each time, for some reason or other, it has to be *deferred*: "(The latter form of association [based on the "appropriation and control of the means of production"] is not arbitrary; it

presupposes the development of material and cultural conditions which are not to be examined any further at this point.[474])" And this is where we remain. But, as always, the negation is revealing: Marx is immediately eager to move away from the word *arbitrary* for the very reason that it holds the secret of any "new man," as though he could already glimpse the repellent features of the positive heroes that would be so zealously produced several decades later. And they were certainly not arbitrary, since they served a purpose. But they were built arbitrarily, like things had once been built by the exchange value.

"In order to secure the exchangeability of the commodity, exchangeability itself is set up in opposition to it as an independent commodity."[475] New spices from the East, from that far point of the East that is the purest and most poisonous West: *exchangeability* arrives on the market, and quickly changes the whole aspect of reality. That same power that was already active in the "arbitrary nature of the sign," in the practice of convention, in every gesture of substitution (x *stands for* y), but which had not yet had the impious presumption to present itself as an independent entity, now asserts itself—and it shows that, instead of letting itself be subsumed and absorbed into the context of the *other* powers, it can itself subsume them, considering them all to be its partial applications. The master Aristotle had already stated: "In reality everything can be used for exchange."[476] Certain platitudes lie dormant in history for centuries, but when roused they become gnashing jaws.

"The purely natural material in which *no* human labor is objectified, to the extent that it is merely a material that exists independently of labor, has no *value*, since only objectified labor is value; as little value as is possessed by the common elements as such."[477]

Since the social machine entirely replaces the machine of the *stoicheīa toū kósmou*, nature itself and its elements (which until then had been the quintessential receptacles of power) have to be totally stripped of their authority and made indifferent to each other since they have "no value," they are not energized by that primal breath that has now shifted to human labor.

Commodity means something that is additional to immediate use, which implies a destruction of the immediate, but its reutilization in a further process (exchange value is transformed into use-value). Its basis is an improper use of the object, in the same way that metaphor is an improper use of the word. Once the object acquires the *secondary* character as a commodity, then the essence of the commodity is such that the object turns out to be *primarily* a commodity, namely exchange value—and only at a given moment (after circulation and purchase) is it an object of use. This is an inversion produced by exchange, but *every* exchange is based upon it, except where the circulation takes place *in the same body*. And the body of the community is irreversibly harmed, in the exchange process, by contact with the body of another community. The *derived* characteristics that strike against the origin, undermine it, sweep it away in their interplay—while still appearing to be derived—are also *distant*, *liminal* characteristics (the first exchange is between community and community, on the border), which then strikes back within the community, "with disruptive action."[478]

The *excluded commodity* is a commodity that becomes a *universal equivalent* and therefore adds to its own particular use-value a second kind of use-value, which it now acquires from being a general equivalent. The excluded commodity becomes a desirable object insofar as it is equivalent to the exchange. Apart from particular desires for individual objects, there is a universal desire for exchange: "the commodity singled out as the universal equivalent, is now an object of a universal need arising from the very process of exchange, and it has the same use-value to everybody, viz., that of serving as the depository of exchange value, of being a universal means of exchange." By the detour of the *excluded commodity* we have arrived as far as identifying a general object of desire, a measuring unit of use—and this, absurdly, is the universal possibility of exchange. The heart of desire is not an object, but the possibility of exchanging objects.[479]

The whole theology of commodities is a process at the end of which the exchange value is transformed back into use value: this process is the *delay* —Freud's *Aufschub*—that generates the whole phantasmagoria of the commodity, "the separation of purchase and sale."[480] And this separation is the generic form of schism and duplicity, which "breaks down the limits of the organic social interchange, which are locally rooted and rendered sacred

by tradition and foolish sentiment."[481] It is "the general form taken by the rupture and separation of all elements which in that social interchange were once united."[482] It is the impossibility of innocence. The same can be said of the word, insofar as it is detached from its correspondence, its kinship, its affinity with what it represents, above all insofar as it is fixed in a simulacrum—writing—which is entirely extraneous to the body, and establishes itself as an incorruptible and independent existence, in the same way as the "money-crystal" does.[483]

Marx is a prisoner of the Enemy he is attacking: his opponent's body falls on him and suffocates him. Marx has the *definitive* view of that machine-for-demolishing-limits that he calls capitalism, yet he doesn't question the *limit*, only the *machine*. He wants to design a better machine, which demolishes limits without breaking down, without getting into periodical crisis. Like a great mechanic, he has a fond, passionate understanding of the capitalist machine. With regard to *limit*, he shares the illusion of that machine. What offended him was not so much the iniquity brought about by capital, but the fact that capital would soon become *an obstacle* to production, an antiquated and sclerotic form in comparison to the enormity of what is possible. No one has ever dreamed the dream of capital with such faith as Marx developed in his soul. Like the young provincial boy who *takes seriously*, with despairing gravity, the ways of the big city: that is how Marx looked upon capital. And, feeling much like Rastignac on the hill of Père Lachaise, he let loose on the world something whose output should have been far more limitless than that of that old machine for destroying limits. Capital had become his Madame de Beauséant. She had taught him good manners, she had introduced him to society, but now he saw her as a wizened old woman, faintly ridiculous, her days now over. So instead he turned his gaze to the debutantes of the proletariat.

So far as development is concerned, it can be said in the end that Marx was more capitalist than capital. Shrewd and meticulous, he searched everywhere to trace the limits of that power that breaks down limits. He wanted to reach the point from which he could look at capitalist production as a form that was *borné*, timid, trapped in itself, and despise it just as capital had despised earlier forms: "(… the *most extreme form of alienation* … contains in *itself*, in a still only inverted form, turned on its head, the

dissolution of all *limited presuppositions of production*, and moreover creates and produces the unconditional presuppositions of production, and therewith the full material conditions for the total, universal development of the productive forces of the individual).” This is a voice of vibrant demonism, the urge for unlimited self-creation: having reached perfect dissolution, the absolute expropriation of man, he imagines he can fill the void at last with all that man had never been. Marx’s fury ends up, not in a humanitarian idyll, but in a savage technological hallucination.

Marx jubilant: “[Capital] therefore restricts labor and the creation of value—by an artificial check, as the English express it—and it does so on the same grounds as and to the same extent that it posits surplus labor and surplus value.[484] By its nature, therefore, it posits a *barrier* to labor and value-creation, in contradiction to its tendency to expand them boundlessly. And in as much as it both posits a barrier *specific* to itself, and on the other side equally drives over and beyond *every* barrier, it is the living contradiction.” The enemy is nailed to *its* limit. But Marx has no wish to consider that *the* limit exists in nature or in the mind.

“*First of all, there is a limit, not inherent to production generally, but to production founded on capital.*” From this he deduces that “capital is not, as the economists believe, the absolute form for the development of the forces of production.”[485] But that “absolute form” exists: this is Marx’s dream, as Hilbert’s dream will be complete axiomatization. No Gödel stepped in to put him right.

“We have already seen that the sphere of circulation has a gap in it, through which gold (or silver, or the money material in general) enters as a commodity with a given value.”[486]

The “gap” is self-reflection. Among all objects there is always one that represents the representation of objects. And that single object is enough to compromise the order of all the others that have gone before it.

“A thing can be a use-value without being a value.[487] This is the case whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labor. Air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc., fall into this category.” From this paradox, which Marx formulates marginally in *Das Kapital*, is derived the articulation of a whole world. Let us follow the ceremony: the significant

area has been marked out: it is the area of value. We touch its substance, which is labor. We search for its unit of measure, which is work-time (this, so far, is Ricardo). We observe its character, which is abstract labor, *sans phrase* (a crucial addition by Marx): an empty notion, which serves to seal the system at every point: "la différence est le langage sensible de la ressemblance—difference is the perceivable language of likeness)" (Marcel Schwob). By affirming the uniformity of elements, it eliminates the immeasurable—just as, in Saussure, the arbitrary nature of the sign (*en principe*) allows language to exist as a system; in the same way that, in Freud, the phallus is the primary signifier that allows exchanges of libido to occur, and to be calculable. In the end, this system based on emptiness reproduces the totality of nature: but this time it is nature that is *processed*, matured by the alchemical process of production (of commodities, of signs, of ghosts).

The *potlatch* is based on the impossibility of *equal exchange*: the exchange has to be unequal. Reciprocity is ruled out, since it is a perpetual deception. Equivalents exist only in the inverted world of initiates, since initiates communicate in a shared epiphany.

Equal exchange is mystical exchange—that of twins, of transparent speech. The machine of capitalism imposes *mystical exchange* as *usual exchange*. "Twins have the right, equal word.[488] They have the same value. They are the same thing. The man who sells, the man who buys, they too are the same thing. They are twins."

The fetishistic character of commodities can be considered in two ways: as a deceptive superstition that persists in the everyday secular world or as a daily opportunity to experience the marvel of the fetish. Marx had the genius to recognize that marvel. But he felt a deep resentment to the marvelous, since he knew it was just the beginning of the terrible. And those exposed to the marvelous are unreliable, are unusable. The slightest gust from the Powers sweeps them away. It is better to put an end to the marvelous in its extreme form, smashing shop windows and devastating their goods. So Marx could offer his gift to a remarkably dull, submissive, and vibrant multitude: he could instruct them how to blow the lock off a world in which every marvel has vanished—or lies dead on the ground, where it is displayed to children as an enemy of the people.

Ricardo's Ruthlessness

A fraternal solidarity prevails between Marx and the cold, cruel theorists who *favor* capitalism. For Marx, this is the only enduring solidarity: to the other socialist theorists he was usually more spiteful and intolerant. And so he happily agrees with Adam Smith in the distinction between productive and unproductive labor: and he defends David Ricardo against all his "sentimental opponents":

"Ricardo, rightly for his time, regards the capitalist mode of production as the most advantageous for production in general, as the most advantageous for the creation of wealth.[489] He wants production *for the sake of production* and this with *good reason*. To assert, as the sentimental opponents of Ricardo's did, that production as such is not the object, is to forget that production for its own sake means nothing but the development of human productive forces, in other words the *development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself*."

But the purpose of the society proposed by Marx as going *beyond* capital is precisely the "*development of the richness of human nature*," its transition to that "omnilaterality" of "total man" that had not yet been achieved. Capital, based on the destruction of limits, was therefore still too *timid* in breaking them down: *beyond* capital was the prospect that production for production's sake would reach its most radical, most intense, most effective form. Marx therefore seeks to shift the clearest and most ruthless concept of capitalistic production (the one put forward by Ricardo) into a context in which capital is engulfed, because it has itself become an obstacle to production.

"Beyond a certain point, the development of the powers of production becomes a barrier for capital; hence the capital relation a barrier for the development of the productive powers of labor."[490]

The theory of the progressive decrease in the rate of profit is aimed primarily at establishing a point of no return, where development finally obstructs itself. Capital, which had been the very spearhead of development, becomes a "barrier," just as the economic relations dissolved by capital had previously been. But, if capital was the *subject* of that process of development that has now turned against it, who will be the subject of the development that destroys capital? Marx, at this point, floats the image of development as a *plan*, as a sequence preestablished by men who have reappropriated their resources and themselves. But the prime characteristic of progress is the impossibility of a preestablished plan, a continual, blind flailing in the dark, where the result is a constant surprise, since there is no knowledge *superior* to the workings of development itself. The other great force of modern society, *control*, emerges here behind the words of Marx, behind the pitiful images of men who take their destiny in hand, behind chromolithographs of the happy throng of workers who become also artists and even fishermen and perhaps also policemen. Yet *control and development* are the beasts that grapple with each other in a slow combat that may be fatal for both.

Ricardo and Marx were rival theologians, but "honestly," "scientifically" devoted to the same God. What indulgent tenderness Marx displays in observing Ricardo's excesses, because after all they were excesses in the *right* direction … "Ricardo, e.g., who believes that the bourgeois economy deals only with exchange value, and is concerned with use-value only exoterically …" Oh, what a noble error![491]

"Thus Ricardo's ruthlessness was not only *scientifically honest* but also a scientific *necessity* from his point of view.[492] But because of this it is also quite immaterial to him whether the advance of the productive forces slays landed property or workers. If this progress devalues the capital of the industrial bourgeoisie it is equally welcome to him. If the development of the productive power of labor halves the value of the *capital fixe*, what does it matter, says Ricardo. The productivity of human labor has doubled, thus here is *scientific honesty*. Ricardo's conception is, on the whole, in the interests of the *industrial* bourgeoisie, only because, and *in so far as* their interests coincide with that of production or the productive development of human labor. Where the bourgeoisie comes into conflict with this, he is just

as *ruthless* to it as he is at other times toward the proletariat and the aristocracy."

Ricardo and Marx therefore each put themselves, respectively, on the side of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but *only as long as* those two classes guarantee maximum productive development. And, in the same way that Marx imagined Ricardo standing ruthlessly against the bourgeoisie, so too we can imagine Marx standing ruthlessly against the proletariat. For the objective—alas—is never anything less than *man*, indeed the human species, a good intention that Darwin's dreary catechism already corroborated. Marx shook his head in irritation: "They reveal a failure to understand the fact that, although at first the development of the capacities of the *human* species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed …" Nietzsche, however, understood it.[493] Every so often, in his last years, he threw himself, like a visionary bookkeeper, into plans and calculations regarding those classes, human types, nations, generations that had to be sacrificed, that ought meekly to submit to one immense experiment.

Geldkristall

In the world of analogy (which is, among other things, the world of qualities) we come across digital emissaries (gold), and in the world of digitality (which is, among other things, the world of quantities) we come across analogical emissaries (gold).

First case: "What does a solely *quantitative* difference between things presuppose? The identity of their *qualities*.[494] Hence, the quantitative measure of labors presupposes the equivalence, the identity of their quality." But, in order to represent convention (therefore the suppression of qualities), we cannot rely, at first, on something conventional (paper

money): we need a material that becomes more and more *precious* as it gets closer to eliminating the differentiating qualities, something closer to pure exchangeability. The digital emissaries present in gold are divisibility, uniformity, and invariability ("the only qualities necessary to make a measure of value a perfect one are, that it should itself have value, and that that value should be itself invariable," writes Ricardo: but *one single quality* is sufficient to compromise the realm of quantity).[495] And Marx is irritated by those naïve people who fail to understand this: "The study of the precious metals as subjects of the money relations, as incarnations of the latter, is therefore by no means a matter lying outside the realm of political economy, as Proudhon believes, any more than the physical composition of paint, and of marble, lie outside the realm of painting and sculpture."[496] Finally: "The precious metals uniform in their physical qualities, so that equal quantities of them should be so far identical as to present no ground for preferring this one to the others.[497] Not the case, for example, with equal numbers of cattle and equal quantities of grain."

Second case: gold as analogical emissary in the digital world. With gradual surprise, we come to realize that the process that eliminates qualities, constantly referred to by Marx throughout *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, is constantly being compared to the process of alchemy, which *produces* qualities. C-M-C and M-C-M (where C and M stand for "commodity" and "money") are the economic translations of *caput mortuum* and *quinta essentia*, and money replaces the *lapis*: "It is exactly as if, for example, the chance discovery of a stone gave me mastery over all the sciences, regardless of my individuality.[498] The possession of money places me in exactly the same relationship to wealth (social) as the philosophers' stone would to the sciences." Thus even here, on alien ground, gold maintains all its mighty array of solar and regal associations, as the vibrant center of a hierarchic system of correspondences. At the center of a neuter, undifferentiated and conventional place we find the most ancient splendor.

For century after century all things, all beings, appeared and moved about accompanied by their Double. At one time, indeed, the dominant presence was the Double, of which the individual being was a mere sign. Doubles then slowly began to fade, to dwindle. Finally they sought refuge in the nocturnal part of nature and let themselves be seen as sporadic and sinister

presences. But new Doubles, of another species, began to spread. This species was exchange value, which multiplied and superimposed itself on the forms of all things. And there was indeed a Double that immediately transformed itself into a thing, without there being a corresponding body. This was money. And this peculiar lack of a body to which to attach itself gave it a longer life. "All commodities are perishable money; money is the imperishable commodity."[499]

There are two movements:

a: All is usable material. The subject is a procedure. Absolute conventionalism. What acts is the void that fixes the terms of the experimentation. It marks out the object and works upon it.

b: All is associated. Universal interdependence. Resonance. Touching one element affects all its kin. But which are its kin? This implies an earlier wisdom, a canon of doctrine.

We cannot do without either of the two movements, in any of their forms. In the "tribal" phase (namely *b*), Marx takes the view that *a* is hidden, but is present and working away as an ineluctable corrosive. In the post-historical phase, only the action of *a* is recognized, while *b* leads a wild and clandestine life, but nevertheless radiates its power over everything.

Money is the *sign of representing*, the sign of predominance achieved by the system of representation (i.e., the system of convention, of substitution, of replacement, of interchangeability) over the system of correspondences (i.e., the system of analogy, of symbol [in the cultic sense], of nondiscursiveness, of association, of uniqueness). Marx's discovery refers to this: to the transition of exchange value from peripheral and marginal power to primary and central power in the modern world, its transition to *capital* power. All forms of life now bear the mark of this process: everything is *under the sign* of exchange value. Once this transition and its implications have been fully understood, all talk about structures and superstructures is pure *blabla* (a word invented by Céline), ready for use in the Soviet Encyclopedia: there is no need whatsoever for a superstructure that corresponds to some kind of conditioning structure. It's enough to say that all is *under the sign* of the exchange value, and that the exchange value is the economic name for a power that otherwise manifests itself in

substitution, in convention, in representation in general, in all its various forms.

Exchange value is a character always present, but is always somewhat hidden and always somewhat incidental or peripheral to reality, a character that has long lived "in the pores of society," like the Jew; a character who—for Marx—is *the Jew* in every society.[500] Over several centuries (and Marx follows it from Ancient Greece to industrial Europe and as far as Balzac) it becomes *the* ultimate character of all reality, to which everything relates, the basis of perception, which permeates every detail. That world in which things have to be exchangeable in order to exist is the world that Marx, *and only* Marx, has fully described in all the phases of its alchemical process. It is the world in which we naturally continue living, that cloaks us all the time with an invisible film. Marx is immensely helpful for us, not because of his crude, humanistic, repellent, inflated, barroom conceptions of social justice, of what *ought* to happen, but because of his invaluable description of the society of substitution, of exchange, as it is—today, now, everywhere, in the fixity of its perpetual expansion.

When real estate and landed property begins to be encompassed by money, the Immutable recognizes its own subjection to the mutable power of exchange. The emblematic transition is already perceivable in the writings of a seventeenth-century pamphleteer, Edward Misselden: "… where before mony was invented, there was an Exchange, or Permutation in moveable and mutable things onely, as Corne, Wine, Oile, and the like: and afterwards in immoveable and immutable things, as Houses, Lands and the like; there was a necessity of mony, to value such things with mony as could not be exchanged.[501] And so by degrees all things came to bee valued with money, and mony the value of all things." If *everything* is divisible (insofar as everything is translatable into money, and money *is* divisible), then nothing inalienable exists any longer. And what is indivisible? Quality. But quality, since it is part of an object, is subject to the rule that applies to all objects, namely that they are translatable into price. And so, at most, it will produce a higher price. Quality becomes *luxury*—and as such controllable, divisible, and exchangeable. Prestige, which was the origin of all value, the primordial exuberance, becomes the value of what is superfluous.

Quality: heir of prestige. The unit for measuring prestige is unascertainable. Prestige is a power that is displayed: through emblems, ordeals, minglings with other forces. We have no unit for measuring force, or at least the force that Giordano Bruno was still dealing with, but was no longer of concern to Newton.

The closure of the cavity of images, as soon as the "money-crystal," *Geldkristall*, is set into it, would seem to herald an invasion of images into immediate reality, a *coniunctio* that would lead back to the origin. But this doesn't happen: the money-crystal refracts only the images of circulation (commodities), whereas its hidden face—which looks out onto the world of images like a porthole onto the ocean—is opaque: on that side the money-crystal offers only a total closure.[502] The opposite occurs among the units of circulation: when money—the crystal set in the empty cavity of circulation, like a "universal equivalent"—is introduced among them, it produces changes that reverberate on the whole boundless range of commodities. These commodities, which until then could assume any form, must now be regulated; they have to fulfill at least three requirements:

a) to be divisible at will: *as opposed to* uniqueness;
b) to be uniform in their single parts: *as opposed to* what is composite;
c) to be identical in every specimen: *as opposed to* the difference.

The light from the crystal, upon refraction, imposes its own characteristics on everything that seeks to be transformed in it. And this means radically changing the status of images in circulation: from *fetishes* —unique, irreplaceable, and exclusive concretions of power—they become things that are above all replaceable, whose virtue lies in their replaceability. And yet—and here, once again, black magic comes into play —the spell of the fetish is not lost: it now encompasses not only the single circulating images, but the whole process.

Money provides the clearest example of inversion: the world becomes *too* esoteric. All hypostatic images tend to become autonomous, but now such images actually become *objects*: money becomes tangible currency, a crumpled banknote. The image thus asserts a position of excessive power, actually transforming itself into a thing, whereas before it was a simple invisible mental presence. But, from the moment in which that thing exists,

the doorway leading to the realm of images is closed. Money comes to occupy that single *empty place* in the circulation of the real ("It always stays behind at a point in the arena of circulation vacated by the commodities").[503] This *hole* that provided access to images: "We have already seen that the sphere of circulation has a hole in it, through which gold (or silver, or the money material in general) enters as a commodity with a given value.[504] Hence, when money begins to function as a measure of value, when it is used to determine prices, its value is presupposed." That cavity is now closed: it is sealed by a sparkling crystal. All metamorphoses are directed to that point, and from it they rebound back: they can no longer refer to occurrences that take place *beyond* those metamorphoses, since everything now happens *on this side*, between their fluid material and the crystal, between the crystal and the multiplicity of forms.

"The circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as a money-crystal."[505] What is happening? A certain relationship between subjects, namely the circulation of goods, produces a natural deposit, a concretion, a crystalline commodity that reflects all other commodities and becomes essential for their circulation. This crystal is not an image: it exists as an object—and, as an object, the properties of the global process of circulation of goods are attributed to it. A double inversion, a *chassé-croisé*, a movement of money back and forth: a *thing* is invented as a concretion of a *process*, attributing to that *thing* the characteristics of the *process*: the characteristics of the *thing* have an effect upon a whole indefinite series of units of the *process* (commodities). The money-crystal becomes a *single* subject, but its uniqueness represents *replaceability* itself. A further paradox of inversion: the modern fetish is not just what appears to be unique, but what is replaceable, reproducible, alienable, to the highest degree. Hence Baudelaire's fascination with prostitution. Prostitution is a guarantee of total alienability, just as the sacred protected the untouchable. In the age of inversion, the sacred is *protected* by its own prostitution.

"Where money is not itself the community, it must dissolve the community."[506] With the transition of exchange value to a position of predominance, with the inversion of the predominant relationship between commodity and money (from C-M-C to M-C-M), money becomes the

community, it embodies in one subject that *nexus rerum* which would now be indecipherable in the world outside it, in the world of "horrid chance."[507] This is how inversion is applied here: the very agent of the Convention inherits the function of the Canon, it takes on the dignity and the powers of the order it has undermined.

History Makes Experiments

The central role played by sacrifice in archaic societies has now been taken over by experiment.

The cruel priests who raised the knife over the altar are now the conspirators.

As a premise to any discourse on experiment, here is a passage that Marx crossed out of *The German Ideology*: "In the main we have so far considered only one aspect of human activity, the *shaping* of nature by men.[508] The other aspect, the *shaping* of men by men …"

Post-history is inhabited by people who believe in "causes," in "mankind," in "society," in many other hypostases, but it is ruled by a scornful (perhaps even transcendental) being for whom *all is material*, all is exchangeable, all is exploitable: a perpetual manipulator, who invents forms and throws them away, grows tired of everyday materials and is always looking for new ones, who digs up the Amazon forests and drills pack ice so as to add a flavor, a distant aroma, to the *kykeòn* served in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The unnamable present.

Marx refers to post-history when he writes about the transition from "history" to "universal history": an experimental phase of history, in which everything forms a single corpus, in which nothing is external to society, in

which everything acts on everything, as in the resonant primordial cosmos. Its empirical background is the world market: a one-way exit from *Borniertheit*, from provincial narrow-mindedness. The world market reinvents a sort of *fate* (in the same way that post-history revives all archaic categories, which are now applied to a reality that inverts the reality in which those categories were born).

"The further the separate spheres, which interact on one another, extend in the course of this development, the more the primal isolation of the separate nationalities is destroyed by the developed mode of production and intercourse and the division of labor between various nations spontaneously [*naturwüchsig*] brought forth by these, the more history becomes world history.[509] Thus, for instance, if in England a machine is invented, which deprives countless workers of bread in India and China, and overturns whole forms of existence of these empires, this invention becomes a world-historical fact …"

"From this it follows that this transformation of history into universal history is not indeed a mere abstract act on the part of the 'self-consciousness,' the world spirit, or of any other metaphysical ghost, but a quite material, empirically verifiable act, an act the proof of which every individual furnishes as he comes and goes, eats, drinks and clothes himself."[510] Nothing is more metaphysical than that "quite material, empirically verifiable act" and it can be said that the true fulfillment of metaphysics, almost its return to the state of mystery, where all is acted out in the absence of words, with a silent display of objects, takes place precisely with what Marx describes as a "transformation of history into universal history."

The societies we study in books, the societies that make up the past, which have left an iridescent pool of detritus or have vanished leaving almost no trace, like bird tracks, all obeyed the need to negotiate, clash and be reconciled with something external to themselves. And from that external thing they drew their finest strength. Or they became chattels of the Despot, who governed them for his *own* ends—the ends of an individual against those of everyone else. The society into which we are born is the first, in the history of the planet, that seeks to be self-sufficient and

answerable only to itself. The names of the Outside exist now only in dictionaries, apart from the word *nature*: but *nature* today indicates first and foremost a sequence of social facts or, at most, accidents. This is another reason why we have to find a different name for this kind of society, and calling it post-historical signifies that the whole of history, in comparison, now appears like a panorama of ruins, an inexhaustible contagion.

In 1908, during twelve weeks of visionary experience, the first post-historical city appeared to Alfred Kubin: its name was Pearl.

History: transformations (events described in history books) happen *against* an order that presents itself as stable. It is an order of substances, of correspondences, of analogies. The invisible, omnipresent, inevitable axis of the world.

Post-history: transformations are implicit in the experimental nature of order, which presents such character as stable.

Today we can recognize the great naïveté of those (and they were many) who in the nineteenth century accused the new age of "materialism." The hidden and imperative gnosis of the modern age assumes, in fact, that all is spirit and that spirit is the most pliable of materials.

"It's no more than x plus y"—today this phrase, more than any other, has full right to rank as Commonplace. We hear it repeated in many forms: it is the wisdom of the man in the street, the insight of the psychologist, it goes with the fixed smile of the researcher: "Life? There's nothing to be surprised about, it's physics plus chemistry." And then we hear the second voice, which Bloy has taught us to recognize in Commonplaces. For something to be "nothing more than," some part of it has to be useless, negligible, voidable. This part is its very appearance, the *letter*, which has to be replaceable with its components. But as soon as we express this formula, a suspicion arises: that the world before us is one of patent esotericism, that it has rejected the nexus with the exoteric, that the letter is no longer a protective shell but the secret meaning itself.

Capitalism: the economic name for an immense upheaval in the brain, the supremacy achieved by exchange—hence by digitality—over all things; every other principle becomes an island within it, just as there are tribal islands inside the global market. Socialism itself, fraternal enemy of

capitalism, depends on capitalism in the same way that a Salvation Army leaflet echoes the verses of Isaiah. In theory, that is. In practice, when socialism is then applied to correct the intrinsic evils of capital, it immediately produces far greater evils, while having no effect on those evils it counters. And this time they are more loathsome evils, since they are more human. In the crudity of capitalism, one element of ordeal remains: money. In socialism, which has the most inept goal—namely to place everything in the hands of man—there is no longer a dark extra-human discriminating factor, such as money. In its place there are new priests: spies.

The park of the Son of Heaven epitomized the whole of nature in miniature, in the middle of society: now the whole of nature is our park, and we don't know what it epitomizes.

An embarrassment peculiar to post-history:

"When one same impression awakens within us a geometer, a child, a poet, an artist, a philologist—a dozen languages and types of accommodations, and series of distinct acts—it is quite understandable that we should feel embarrassed."[511]

In Russia, law is an imported item. Like all exotic curiosities, it rouses enthusiasm and creates its devotees. But the background onto which it is applied remains hostile. There are then two possibilities: either the law is banished forthwith, insofar as it attempts to contaminate the genuine prosperity of the land, or it is assimilated, but in such a way as to be held forever in contempt. During his brief months in power, Tsar Peter III, who played games with wooden soldiers and had a mouse court-marshaled and hanged for daring to climb over two cardboard fortresses, decided to introduce in Russia the code of law that Frederick the Great had recently brought into force in Prussia. "But," as Claude Rulhière noted, "both through the ignorance of the translators and the shortage of words in the Russian language for all the ideas of law, not a single senator could understand the code; and the Russians saw this vain attempt merely as a sign of contempt for their own ways and a foolish attachment to foreign ways."[512] When it came to the age that sought to *explain* history step by step, Frederick's enlightened and military law was replaced by Marx's law

of the phases of development of productive forces. But both of these served above all to perfect the practices of the Bureau of Secret Affairs, set up by Peter the Great to oversee the conduct of the nation through a sophisticated policing system—and which continued operating with zeal and providence under various names, from Ochrana to the KGB, offering among other things the only example in Russia of the undeniable march of progress.

Between the death of Hitler and the death of Stalin, there was a moment of lull in which nations, still dazed, prepared meekly to slot into the new order. Post-history had finished blossoming; it now awaited an Amazonian lushness. During those years there was a proliferation of objects. Anyone practiced in the hermetic arts would have described them as subtle objects—objects that, in comparison with ordinary objects up to that time, were like the subtle body is to the gross body in alchemy. The peculiar mechanisms of the age gradually came into motion. The first moves of the game were indicated by the war in Algeria and the assassination of John Kennedy. And everything soon became wrapped up in it, everyone was involved, with the same naturalness that Coca-Cola cans were used to decorate fetishes, between nails and splintered glass, as though they had always been there for that purpose.

Two parallel histories can be written about what took place between 1945 and today: one by the historians, with all its intricate apparatus of parameters, statistics, masses, political parties, movements, negotiations, production; and the other by the secret services, punctuated by murders, deceptions, betrayals, bombings, cover-ups, arms deals. We know that both histories are inadequate, that each claims to be self-sufficient, that neither could be transposed into the other, that they will continue their parallel lives. But hasn't it perhaps always been like this—at least since the time when the Old Man of the Mountain let his men loose on the world? Yes, it has long been so, but secrecy at that time really was secret—and evidence of it was arbitrary and restricted, a presence perceptible but elusive—a presence, in fact, that remained secret. Secrecy had not yet been assimilated into the secret services. For this to happen, it was necessary to wait for the years of pure post-history, the expression used here—a poor name, which only indicates our inadequacy in the face of the unnamable present—to describe the age that follows 1945.

The metaphysical significance of the secret services lies in the words that describe them: *secret services* because they take over secrecy, the *whole* of secrecy. Their meaning—far more than in their foul and dizzying achievements—lies in the fact that, through violence, they have forced the secret to make itself apparent, to become too visible, as blatant as a poster on a street corner. There is one task that all secret services share, which is far more relevant, far more effective than all their wars: the annihilation of the secret.

Post-history: the numbing epiphany in which hypostases solidify, they become tangible bodies, and thus become less perceivable than ever before. Their contagion casts doubt on the substance of all bodies. When secrecy is put into words, the words dazzle. They are no longer read; they are merely reproduced.

"Hidden power," "secret organization," "scheming," "manipulation," "conspiracy," "double-dealing": words and concepts that had once been those of the Gnostics, who were still illuminated by the oblique light of the Templars, and today mean murder, international blackmail, bribery, corruption. Crime assumes the shape that used to be that of the perennial heresy: of gnosis.

The secret agent is cloaked by a peculiar squalor, which has begun to emerge even in the novel. Yet why should this squalor have such a penetrating effect? Because the secret agent usurps the place of the secret—and Psyche is deeply disappointed when she realizes that the monster is no longer the secret, but the agent who had the task of destroying it.

Praxis, an obvious notion for every Jesuit, might only sound like a bold impiety in the cramped cities of Germany, where "time falls drop by drop, and no sound disturbs the reflections of solitude."[513] Only in the upstanding, awkward, Nordic province, in its stolid and respectable melancholy, could such exaltation stir the leaves and dust, until its frenzied citizens took up their spades to mix blood with earth. Marx's word presupposes, as material that demons can infiltrate, a place that is "profoundly tranquil; they sometimes made a noise there about certain ideas, but without ever thinking of applying them.[514] One would have said that thought and action were

made to have no reference to each other, and that truth, among Germans, resembled the statue of Hermes, without hands to seize, or feet to advance." Madame de Staël, thanks to her worldly knowledge, felt all of this straightaway, but it was too early for her to talk it over with Marx, who would have identified philosophy with those missing hands and feet.

Tsar Nicholas I was an intermediary in the long (and now stale) encounter between intelligentsia and praxis. Around 1840, at the start of the "important decade 1838–1848" (as Pavel Annenkov baptized it), the Russian authorities felt it appropriate for those young men wanting to go to the West to be directed toward the German universities rather than to Paris, a place of corruption and revolution. It was thought that Germany still kept some vestige of decency, under the mystical despotism of Friedrich Wilhelm IV. But if the purpose, according to the ominous words of the minister Uvarov, really was to delay Russia's intellectual development by fifty years, then history had once again taken its cue from a shrewd deceit on the part of the police and the rulers in order to turn it into an absurdhty. Certainly, in Berlin, barricades and insurrections were abominated. But nor did the city have the lurid charm of the dissipated life, "la vie moderne," the edgy *chroniques* in the newspapers, it lacked the volatile blend of fever and cynicism that Baudelaire breathed each day. It lacked the hidden presence of the Faubourg Saint-Germain or the overt presence of the *grisettes*. Snobbery had not yet infiltrated its crude substance. Germany lacked something: it hadn't lived long enough. So much more virulent was the energy associated with ideas, more glamorous and alluring was the exotic vision of an "action," of a "praxis" into which to transform it. The young Engels, already an excellent chronicler of events, put it like this: "Ask anybody in Berlin today on what field the battle for dominion over German public opinion in politics and religion, that is, over Germany itself, is being fought, and if he has any idea of the power of the mind over the world, he will reply that this battlefield is the University, in particular Lecture-hall No. 6, where Schelling is giving his lectures on the philosophy of revelation."[515] In that lecture hall a young Russian aristocrat, Mikhail Bakunin, was seen wildly applauding the philosopher. He had arrived in Berlin in 1840 as if to the "New Jerusalem," with money given by his friend Aleksandr Herzen. In the vast land from which he came, his fellow countrymen were already talking tumultuously about Schelling and Hegel,

even in the farthest districts. Signs of this could be seen as early as 1830 in Ivan Kireyevsky's letters from Berlin, and every post-Hegelian pamphlet was being read by too many. Nothing is more fertile than misunderstanding. What in Germany was the restless urge to move on to "action," which naturally assumed those professorial, pedantic, aloof features that Marx and Engels would ridicule from *The Holy Family* onward, became in Russia the natural legacy of the "superfluous men," impoverished and humiliated aristocrats, consumed by *rêverie*, geometric loci for subtle psychic dissociation—the Russian disease and, later on, the Russian novel! These, in short, were the most prized materials of the intelligentsia. For these people, hopelessly extraneous to all academic solace, "action" was the only Fata Morgana capable of channeling their immense latent violence in *one* direction, without it being lost in the whirling abjection of personal life.

The point of contact—central even from a geographical point of view—was a small book entitled *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie* published in 1838 by a Polish nobleman, August Cieszkowski, a fatal splinter in the Hegelian legacy. In just a few pages, which sectioned history by triads, as his master had taught, Cieszkowski unleashed the djinn of praxis—a word apparently bare and secular, in which the new figure of the Paraclete emerged. It sought above all to follow the consequences of a statement that then sounded plausible: "Now, *thought itself has thought itself through*."[516] What then is the next step, the "transition" that opens up? It "lies in the recognition that consciousness is not the supreme end but must itself advance over and outside itself and, even better, *out of itself*."[517] Transition appears as the demand for a *substantial* unity of thought and being which is not simply *in and for itself* but must also generate a substratum *out of itself*." Behind its coding, the language of Hegelian descent is very exact: that "substratum" is none other than new material, *technical material*, which is searching timidly for a name. But, for it to flourish, Will has finally to be transferred from its Napoleonic catechism to places that were so far forbidden: "*Now it is the absolute will which should be raised to the heights of speculation which reason has already known* … Philosophy leaves its own proper position and rises above itself into a domain which is alien but which nevertheless thoroughly conditions its further development, i.e., into the *absolutely practical sphere of the will*."[518] This marked the complete reversal of the relationships between thought and will: "According to Hegel, will is only a particular way of thinking, and this is

itself the wrong conception: on the contrary, it is thought that is a constituent moment of will, since will and action are *thought that returns to being*." The dream of "reconciliation with reality under every aspect and in every field of life," which obsessed the very young Hegelian Bakunin (and so many others throughout Europe!), could therefore happen through trust in the magic of this entirely new, elementary word: *praxis*.[519] The fact that barely concealed behind it was the "will of will" in which Heidegger would establish the emblem of nihilism (and therefore technology) could not have been apparent, primarily because they all had so little experience of technology. And yet it was Cieszkowski once again who formulated the maxim that regulated the new times: "*Nihil est in voluntate et actu quod prius non fuerit in intellectu*—There is nothing in the will or in action that was not already in the intellect."[520] This was to have a crucial consequence. "The will must thus undergo its phenomenological process as reason has already done.[521] Political life [*Staatsleben*] must, in its turn, affirm its universal hegemony as art and philosophy have done, one after the other." And here his pragmatism all of a sudden becomes brutal: "In the future, philosophy must agree to become principally *applied*.[522] Just as the poetry of art passes over into the prose of thought, so must philosophy descend from the height of theory into the field of praxis." Philosophy, "applied" at last, agrees to die, but penetrating first into every object, as we can now recognize.

Abnormal events were brewing in the inner recesses of history: a "new migration," no longer of barbarians toward the spirit, but of the spirit toward the barbarities of nature, eager for deliverance. A dark process, "announcing itself with a fermentation, and indeed in part with a putrefaction" (and don't Marx and Engels speak shortly after about "the putrefaction of the Hegelian philosophy"?).[523, 524] At the end of this alchemical process, *coniunctio* shines brightly once more: in this case it is the abrogation of *Trennung,* of that odious "separation" that had brought so much suffering to Lessing, and to all the cruel and tender souls of romanticism after him. "Thus absolute *peace* is celebrated between interiority and exteriority and this assures the appearance, outside and inside, of that mutual victory of theirs, which removes tangible appearance from the contempt in which it was held."[525] Cieszkowski's tangled arguments enmesh what will soon be contending powers of thought. Marx

(who claims in a letter of 1882 not to have read Cieszkowski, but this is difficult to believe), Nietzsche, and Stirner are still waiting, hidden in the dream of that unreal peace, to spring forth, split company, and clash.

The Artificial Barbarian

"… we who do not think and talk aphoristically but live aphoristically; we who live *aphorisménoi* and *segregati*, as aphorisms in life, without association with men, having no share in their grief and their joy; we who are not consonants in the clamor of life but are solitary birds in the stillness of night."[526]

Stirner is one of many signs that point to the end of education. Cast out of the classroom into the Absolute Spirit, as the master Hegel had wished, he could acquire none of those quiet manners, none of those slight inflections of voice that had made civilization, and which in the end, out of discretion, claimed to be no more than minuscule remnants of Taste. For him, all that was left now was the obsessive rosary of the idea, or the roar, or aphasia, to which he eventually gave vent: the hammering of the silence (as in the brain) that yawns behind the emptied idea.

Stirner speaks continually of specters and ghosts. And, as he speaks, everything becomes caught up in that leaden spell that his shrill, insolent, relentless voice hoped to dissolve away—or to ridicule. But no one is more spectral than Stirner. It is easier to meet him among specters than among philosophers. As someone would inevitably observe, it must be supposed that Stirner is no subject for any respectable philosopher. If you touch his words, then wash your hands. Even the author's name can hardly be taken seriously—it conjures the picture of a magician in top hat and cloak, rather than that of a dignified thinker. Stirner remains expunged from culture, despite the hundreds of books written about him.

Many recall Stirner only because Marx and Engels wrote so many vitriolic pages against him in *The German Ideology*—in rather the same way that Eugen Dühring is remembered most of all for Engels's *Anti-Dühring* (though in that case it would be kinder to ignore both Dühring and the Anti-Dühring). Yet there are a few people who admire Stirner to such a point that they prefer not to admire others so as not to diminish him. They venerate the very man who wanted to destroy the sacred and to eliminate veneration—and at times they incline toward mild lunacy, or toward a cold fury. At any moment, in some part of the world, a small printing press is working away on a new edition of *The Ego and Its Own*. In the compartment of a railway carriage there's always a dark figure with a cardboard suitcase in which you'd find a copy of *The Ego*, generally along with a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The university ignores such matters. It forgets it was Stirner who disfigured it once and for all. It considers his work as a good subject for a dissertation. But to deal with Max Stirner in one of the countless histories of the Young Hegelians or of Anarchism is already an invitation to disregard his monstrosity. Stirner then becomes a "position," albeit extreme, ultimate, in relation to something. Some readers have certainly been aware of that monstrosity, and have openly accepted or rejected it. But the nameless body of culture has failed to recognize it. Having reached a stage of its life in which (like everything else) it claims to be autonomous, it secretes from within itself a new substance and, soon after, a new figure: artificial barbarity, the artificial barbarian. Stirner proclaims them, he defines them. And immediately becomes spectral. Stirner's presence is felt most intensely in two authors, Nietzsche and Marx, who remain silent about him or refer to him in texts they never published. Many of their words cannot be understood unless we read them as impatient, at times feverish, mutterings addressed to a ghost that haunts them—the ghost of Stirner. Marx and Nietzsche never had much to say directly to each other. Yet they give the impression of being two people who have never met, but who have had the same dream (or nightmare). And they are then compelled to conspire together at least in the desperate, loud, angry, circular conflict with each other's ghost. That conflict chains them together like prisoners in the same jail. These first two conscious instigators of an "experimental philosophy" found one secret part of their thought in Stirner, but it is precisely that part whose consequences they didn't wish to recognize. Throughout their life we can follow the

stages of a patient effort to conceal this resemblance, in an attempt to escape from the dark silence of the man who had gone before them in committing the intoxicating betrayal of thought. Marx and Nietzsche's audacity follows directly from that first and overwhelming audacity of Stirner. "It took an *eiserne Stirne* [an "iron brow," once again in the sense of "audacity"] to write this book [*The Ego and Its Own*], and one might almost believe it was for this very reason that the author chose the name Stirner."[527]

Thought had long waited to debase itself. But someone sufficiently godless was needed to help it along. Someone who had "the taste and the genius for provocation," like Saint Paul, Nietzsche, and Joseph de Maistre, but who dared take a step that had so far been avoided: to lump together metaphysics and mad ravings, and buckle them from one end to the other with an elegant clasp.[528] The task fell to a teacher at Madame Gropius's school for young girls from respectable families, who wrote in the Berlin gazettes in the years just before 1848 under the name Stirner.

Many later declared what many others had suspected, without daring to say it—that metaphysics consisted, generally speaking, of mad ravings. An idea that suited the coarseness of the times. More disarming was another idea, to which scarce attention was given: that mad ravings could be metaphysical. Stirner made a generous contribution to forever muddying the waters of thought. After him, the distinction between who is a philosopher and who is not would be a simple administrative consideration. Implicit in every phrase of Wittgenstein is a contempt for philosophy as a profession. Each morning, between five and eight, Valéry put down his thought experiments in dozens of notebooks but was careful not to mention them during the day in the salons, at the *Académie*, or dining out. Musil camouflaged himself among the scientists who, with a faint hint of a smile, frequented Diotima's cocktails of the Spirit. Mad ravings now coated everyone with benevolence, harboring them in its deep crevices.

They said they were witnessing the advent of disenchantment. But for how many centuries (some even spoke of millennia) had such disenchanted continued to survive! And the world carried on: it remained enchanted. Stirner describes how a disenchanted being *ought* to live—and his irony stems from the observation that such a being does not exist. If it could exist,

it would be classified by disappointed scientists as a survival from ancient times: mute, violent, unpredictable, protean. With no ascertainable identity. *Unique.*

The division of people between Platonists and Aristotelians can also be put in another way, using perhaps a more accurate distinction: people can be divided between those who think the world is governed by magic and those who don't. Among those who don't, many make the mistake of believing that magic is some practical illusion (though an interesting prelude to science). But Wittgenstein made it clear: the magic is not *how* the world is, but *that* it is.

Marx's rancor toward the petty bourgeoisie stems from his tastes as a classicist. Forms, for him, could only be closed and clear cut. Profiles had to stand out against a bare and indifferent background. The aristocrat has such a profile, as does the bourgeois (so long as he keeps to the basic vices and virtues that define him)—and so too, finally, does the worker. But what lies between these forms is the most irredeemable evil. For Marx, the petty bourgeoisie are the *Lumpen* ("rags") of the bourgeoisie. The *Lumpen* are evil itself. What worries him about them is a certain metamorphic and pliable character, the lack of a personal physiognomy, which enables them to become anything whatsoever, with no respect for the ranks endorsed by history. In those damp sands of spite, ambition, resentment, and delirium he could already see the birth of Bolshevism and Fascism. And this was fine for the Bolsheviks: the acid bath of the Cause would be enough to render them unrecognizable. The revolutionary, by definition, has no origins ("he doesn't even have a name," according to Nechayev's *Revolutionary Catechism*): he has only a purpose. But it was the countless other proliferating *Lumpen* that frightened Marx and seemed beyond control, like migrating jellyfish. He recognized Stirner as the harbinger of that venomous array. Stirner's *individual* provided the anthropological model, not for the petty bourgeois, as Marx and Engels would claim for reasons of tactical argument, but for something far more frightening: the model for the breakdown of the class system, the chaotic irruption that came, just before the final act, to destroy the sacred drama of history. This was the ultimate unforgivable sin—and is enough to explain the fury of the attack against Stirner.

Stirner prepares for gratuitous terror on the basis of a solid Hegelian education; Maurice Barrès prepares to plunge into the wisdom of blood on the basis of the keenest dandyism. Paul Bourget regarded the young Barrès of *Un Homme libre* as a "delicate nihilist," who possesses "all the aristocracies of nerves" and who derides the world, which has already reached the "puberty of silliness" (Huysmans).[529, 530] All that is left then is to breathe in the stench of cattle stalls, and ask for everything to "be part of the race again."[531] The intermediary will be a young tainted child, Bérénice. We are told that "she adopted as a doll a small gilded statue of Our Lady, whose stomach opened to reveal the Trinity."[532] People take hold of the past, of race, of blood, when the delicate nihilist's ego has reached its weary end, when the experimentally produced barbarity needs an Order to cling to. (That Ego had taken form in the latter years of the nineteenth century, ready for the "boys of 1889."[533] Before then, there was a barely detectable trace of that aesthetic arrogance: after, it would disappear or would become mixed with many other tastes of the masses—but it had now lost its clandestine, isolated, and depraved quality).

One of the prime characteristics of *The Ego and Its Own* is its brutality. But a reasoned brutality, which is reached through education, indeed through the most ambitious pedagogical system the West has produced, the only one that could claim to absorb, incorporate and subsume everything, in its frenzy of *Aufhebung*. The teachers of Germanic idealism strove, working obscurely on the concept to cancel out anything immediate, conspicuous, fleeting, or violent that might emerge. Even Stirner's enemies recognize that he had the malicious gift of consistency. It remained to be seen how the peak of culture would be viewed from the unknown land of *artificial barbarity* to which Stirner introduces us with the gentle smile of the teacher opening his classroom door, where Madame Gropius's young girls are waiting.

Why still hang about among the sawdust and beer stains of Hippel's tavern? There had been so many trials and tribulations since then, we might even have forgotten about it. But nothing can alter the fact that it was thanks to Stirner, a minor character, that culture's protective shell—to use the jargon of the Absolute Spirit once again—was pierced for the first time. It was he who helped bring about that global and irrevocable *loss of dignity* that has become our foundation. From then on, even the most cultured

discourse is pervaded by a certain barbarity: it is a new prerequisite of sensibility, of thought. It will be useful, then, to bring it back to light in its crudeness. Even before Marx, Freud, or Nietzsche (who were all basically respectable human beings, well-mannered, and well aware that they had to remain so, even if their "critique of the existent" might—must—end up undermining it), the world of today derives, without knowing it, from Stirner. And it couldn't know it, not only since "there's no certainty about the father," but because all paternity has now to be considered spurious, and Stirner has only the obscure task of settling the matter, as befits a lowly clerk of Nothingness: "The civilized being of the big cities returns to the wild state—i.e., to the state of isolation, because the social mechanism enables him to forget the needs of the community and lose feelings of attachment between individuals, which at one time were constantly reawakened by need.[534] All improvement in the social mechanism causes certain acts, certain ways of feeling, certain attitudes to communal life to become useless."

They expected him to arrive from the Eastern frontiers, with thin Mongol mustaches and a bone necklace, with furs smeared with marrow and blood: he appeared as a teacher at a boarding school for girls from well-to-do Berlin families, with a smart but well-worn jacket, oval spectacles, and a shy, scornful countenance. When his friends at Hippel's tavern became too rowdy, he moved aside, to a corner of the table. As he wrote, in his musty lodgings, a screeching sound of overwrought nerves could be heard, verging on a howl. After the publication of *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner's life, in the same old Berlin that now even wanted to forget Hegel, is a simple humdrum and exotic fact, like that of Rimbaud at Harar. It would later transmigrate into its two final forms: the silence of Bartleby, and Traven's *The Death Ship*.

The Big City must already be there before Stirner can be born. The ghost of the enemy of ghosts belongs not so much to Hippel's tavern in Berlin, where *Die Freien*—the Free Ones—met, but to the underground of Petersburg, to the bowels of Paris, to the mountains of garbage in London, to the death ships that swallow up their paperless and nameless passengers in the port of Antwerp. Its meeting place is wherever you find the grim crowd of feverish autodidacts, ghost writers, people ready to do anything

since they have nothing, disgraced bourgeois, penniless aristocrats, the damned of the earth, cast out of a savanna, out of the swamps or from the desert beneath the marble vaults of the polytechnics of another continent, the ever vaster crowd of those acquainted above all with public humiliation and solitary exaltation. On hotel registers Nietzsche always gave his occupation as "university professor," though he no longer was, and every year he felt himself more clearly resembling those teeming wraiths. Among them he could even have found a role—he had already chosen one: that of the "respectable criminal." He loathed that brash and raucous company, and yet he knew his books would at last find prehensile ears among them. He distanced himself from them in every way, exhausting every last virtue of good manners. But he could not ignore the innumerable signs of affinity. When Dostoyevsky wrote in his notebooks, with curiosity and disgust—alongside details of sums of money never received or already spent—that *man no longer had a profile*, he had already been surrounded for some while by a hostile throng of those presences in his room; indeed, he belonged to them and had betrayed them. He consummated his long betrayal in his novels, often riven by the convulsive hilarity of someone too close to what he is narrating, like a policeman reporting a killing in which he himself was implicated.

Stirner is the barbarian coming from a Germany still divided into small states, who bursts into the heart of the metaphysical empire. The same instruments that had helped Hegel to absorb every remnant of barbarity into the Spirit, now serve to dismantle the spirit, to uproot it from all terrain, to bore into the anthropological soil of the Enlightenment. The true "philosophy of the hammer," which Nietzsche could never put into practice, since he was too hopelessly polite, is achieved in the short, punchy, aggressive phrases that make up *The Ego and Its Own*.

Stirner's *egoist* rejects every kind of dependence: but all dependence is a root, whether earthly or celestial. Stirner's egoist is the rootless man who for the first time recognizes himself as such. He wanders the city as a perfect outsider to everything and everyone. The words that invade his mind, the desires that assail him—he regards everything as an object to use or discard, *his* is simply the gesture of taking or distancing himself. He is the man from underground who pillages metaphysics.

Stirner has left us no moving letters from Schulpforta asking for Schumann scores, nor could he have done. In him, there is something physiologically tainted and corrupt when it comes to culture, something that poisons him from the start.

Stirner's premise: the process of secularization is unable to wear down or indeed cancel out the sacred, as it professes. It shifts it, nothing else. And the power that the sacred assumes is all the more devastating and unconstrained since it no longer has a name, nor can it be recognized for what it is.

What has Stirner not yet been forgiven for? Not so much for the many blatantly criminal declarations sprinkled like Far Western spices into his neo-Hegelian cuisine. Not so much for the figures of the "egoist" and "ownness," so incongruous and irreducible to any practical reasonableness. But, for example, for a quickfire phrase ("Our atheists are pious people") that sums up a demonstration that nobody has been able to refute.[535] Stirner described our world, scourged by criticism that is "restlessly pressing forward" toward total clarity of thought, as a deeply sanctimonious world.[536] What is more sanctimonious, indeed, than a healthy layman, so conceited and credulous in his principles? And those proud atheists, all convinced that a supreme mystic like Giordano Bruno was one of them? The Church, which burned him, knew much better what it was dealing with. They, on the other hand, even erected a monument to him, as if he were the Unknown Soldier. And Enlightened thinkers? If they really do exist, they should first of all stop believing in Enlightenment. These are the new "pious people," whose sanctimony is not even protected by the mediation of ceremony, by the arcane pragmatism of a church. Rather than being governed by a sacrament, they let themselves be possessed by capital letters: Society, Humanity, Mankind, the Species—these were the nineteenth-century favorites that still plague the present day, though many others have been added. They don't know on what assumptions they act, and they don't like it when quizzed by some irreverent sophist. If they are forced to reveal them, they offer a most paltry vision. Scraps of banality, reels of Commonplaces form the core of their Principles and Values. Better that they cover them with their superstitious practices. Which are not always murderous—at times they have a certain stolid meekness.

Halfway between the oppressed masses and the oppressing masses, Stirner anticipates Lautréamont's scurrilous words on poetry that "must be made by all, not by one."[537] But he applies them to philosophy. We are inundated in *The Ego and Its Own* by ideas that had long despaired of ever finding a place in a book. Brutish thoughts. This infringement of etiquette is an unexpected effect of democratic rule. Lautréamont the chronicler would explain it like this: "Doubt has always existed in a minority.[538] In this century it is in the majority. We inhale the violation of duty through the pores." Doubt stabs every thought that raises its head. But its blade will allow its victims an easy resurrection. Those thoughts will soon reappear: as opinions.

In what respect do Marx and Engels mislead, when discussing Stirner? In more or less every respect. In a book like *The Ego and Its Own*, where paradox is the *purpose of the text*, where everything is incoherent and wanders away from every path it takes, it is easy to pretend not to notice that the incoherence, the paradoxes, and the deviation were not accidental, but were the very aim of the discourse; it is easy to refuse to see that this raving is no more than the final step toward silence—and the destruction job is complete. At that point it is perfectly easy to say that *The Ego and Its Own* is incoherent, paradoxical, deviant, and delirious. This, of course, could be said in just two or three pages. And the fact that Marx and Engels repeat it for more than three hundred pages is at least evidence of their ill-will. Evidence also of their foresight. Now united by the Sacred Bond of the Cause, they could hardly avoid denouncing the book which, more than any other, mocks the Cause, the Bond, and above all the Sanctity of the Cause and the Bond. Supposing (though not accepting for one moment) that the force of their "criticism" had already managed to dispel any sacred aura, this didn't mean that Marx and Engels were prepared to reveal it exoterically. The working class needed its own holy icons, the Cause would be guarantor of decency, of ordered and industrious lives, dedicated above all to increasing abnegation in the struggle and conflict with the Enemy. In no circumstances should it be revealed that Free Thought—a way of being that seemed purged at last of all chimeras—was the true church mouse of modern times. Stirner's prussic acid, even the smallest dose of it, would have been enough to produce an irreversible spasm on the mighty body of the Worker, a sad anthropological figment on which Marx and Engels

sought to build their own practices, before being replaced by fervent "engineers of the human soul." In the leaden prose of Stirner's book, in its obsessive repetitions and its indecorous arguments, Marx-Engels, who now sought to speak to the whole mass of proletariats, saw before their eyes *another* terrible mass—not that mass of Pellizza da Volpedo's workers, marching proudly to be shot down by mustachioed officials, but an infernal, shapeless, ragged, incorrigible collection of vagabonds, incapable of class loyalty, rootless from the womb, violent, inarticulate, irreverent enemies of labor and learning, that mass which the newspapers described with a shiver of dismay as the "dregs of society." It was the underground emerging into the open, and the "reserve army" of shadows threatened to strangle the proletariat before the proletariat managed to strangle the bourgeoisie.

The accursed scission, that *Trennung* which had already tormented Lessing's Masons, thus penetrated the immaculate stronghold of the proletariat: seemingly crossed by a barely visible crack, a malignant line that swallowed up anyone who strayed from the right course. The damned of the earth would reemerge from that disguised chasm years later: they now formed a limitless network, equal only to the network that capital was casting over the planet. Having hidden like mice from every dependable census, they held the most elusive and corrosive weapon: silent rejection, repudiation of society in whatever form. Marx and Engels's secret concern, in their practical action, was not so much the bourgeoisie, this devious class which, from the outset, had proved that it was just as eager to destroy itself as capable of recovering. It was the Lumpenproletariat, these dregs of all classes, this "apotheosis of rootlessness" that was likely to do something no less damaging than the various, predictable, defenses of class interests. The *Lumpen* threatened the very system of historical class succession, that salvific system on which was based the acceptance of present torture and of the radiant future. If the proletariat were not the *ultimate* class, were not the final class, the class that would make human destiny become *weltgeschichtlich*, that would have given it a global dimension, if the proletariat within it struggled to distinguish itself from *another* proletariat, that of the *Lumpen*, then the whole system seemed under threat, the pattern of historical Providence no longer converged toward *one* final point, but was itself in danger of becoming swallowed up by the *regressus in infinitum* of relentless dissociation.

This, then, was the threat signaled by Stirner, but it could not be named, since the mere fact of recognizing it extended its existence. And so Marx and Engels never declare that they are fighting Stirner for these reasons. They try, instead, to drive him back among the innocuous band of Berlin philosophers and even want to pass him off, against all the evidence, as "the weakest and most ignorant member" of "his whole philosophical fraternity."[539] References to the question of the *Lumpen*, even in *The German Ideology*, are brief and curt, but all the more significant: "He is consistent also in identifying the proletariat with pauperism, whereas pauperism is the position only of the ruined proletariat, the lowest level to which the proletarian sinks who has become incapable of resisting the pressure of the bourgeoisie, and it is only the proletarian whose whole energy has been sapped who becomes a pauper.[540] Compare Sismondi, Wade, etc. 'Stirner' and his fraternity, for example, can in the eyes of the proletarians, in certain circumstances, count as paupers but never as proletarians." The proletarian therefore epitomizes the smugness of poverty, and would never invite a pauper into his home. The reasons for this real class hatred are obscure: Marx and Engels tell us only that the "ruined proletarian" has no more "energy." Sufficient motive—one might think—for the proletarians who are not yet ruined to trample him down. But can it be true that the "ruined proletarian" has no more energy? Or might it be a much more insidious energy, an energy that no longer allows itself to be channeled? Better to ignore the question and move on—this is the tactic chosen by Marx and Engels. It is true, even later, that the attacks on the *Lumpen* were violent, but they were always incidental and occasional. It hadn't to be too apparent that (for Marx and Engels) the ultimate criterion for humanity was its availability to be organized. But their habitual contempt remained. It is enough to see with what sense of proud repugnance even Rosa Luxemburg would warn her comrades years later: "On the other hand the working class is the last class of bourgeois society that comes on the scene with revolutionary aims, and there is no question of it being overwhelmed by an even more radical social level, that goes beyond the aims consciously established by the proletariat.[541] The only social level below the proletariat, the level of disinherited social parasites, such as prostitutes, delinquents by profession, and every species of obscure and casual existences is not a revolutionary but, on the contrary, a counterrevolutionary factor." And Lenin with characteristic nonchalance

would consider the consequences of that hatred, to shore up the barrier against the recurring tide of anarchism: "Anarchism is a product of desperation.[542] It is the psychology of an intellectual who has gone off the rails or of a representative of the *Lumpenproletariat*, not of a proletarian." Thus it was made clear, once and for all, what was to be the *correct psychology* of the proletarian, and of the intellectual who doesn't go off the rails.

But even then, Marx and Engels hadn't included Russia in the calculation. To hold someone up to contempt as a narrow petty bourgeois and a raving intellectual pauper was not an effective argument in a place where, from the wreckage of all classes, the poisonous flower of the intelligentsia was beginning to bloom and the delirium readying itself to become eminently "practical." From his shabby lodgings in Berlin, Stirner communicated directly with the Russian underground. The egoist was above all the man making his voice heard from underground. And if Stirner's obsessive arguments produced the aphasia he desperately wanted, the voice of the underground has never stopped since: it has infused every discourse, tainted all serious argument, derided all status, chased history down every passageway. Stirner's hidden face—that which Marx hadn't wanted to recognize—would reemerge in Russia. The whole Hegelian panoply, the academic disputes, the pretense to expounding a "philosophy," were no more than unwieldy, ostentatious papier-mâché castles—enough to stir the solitary laugh, like the shameful memories that Dostoyevsky would record through the Underground Man (a "collegiate assessor" by profession): the yellow stain on his trousers, his urge to jostle the arrogant officer on Nevsky Prospect, the dull faces of his former schoolmates. *The Ego and Its Own* would have found its epigraph in Dostoyevsky: "Gentlemen, you must excuse me for being overphilosophical; it's the result of forty years underground."

Marx was superstitiously clear-sighted in his fear of the power that comes from the loss of class, which clouds every shining ascent of the proletariat. Loss of class doesn't mean moving from one class to another, but moving from one class, with all its customs and codes, to a place that wavers, that has no name, no identity, no affiliation, and is no longer inside society but *against* it. The individual, this refractory person of whose

genealogy in the capital process Marx would give a brusque portrayal in his *Grundrisse*, nevertheless escaped his grasp as an empirical existence. That mental turmoil, unanchored from everything, was no longer a material that could be easily elaborated. At worst it could spawn the terrorist. What is more, he was the character who first engineered the separation from the most oppressive faith that Marx shared with his times (and with our times): the faith in Society. Back in Balzac's time, we find many instances of deprivation and slow degradation in both the salons and the pantries of Paris. But loss of class never produces the "Russian effect." Here the stately *comédie* still holds sway, involving a long-drawn-out sequence of degrees and half degrees by which one can rise or fall in status. The dark center is Vautrin, the eye of the criminal and policeman, who represents omnipotence *from below*. He alone can wear all masks with impunity, since he is the god who visits his victims incognito. All the others can wear many masks, in succession, but are each time pressed and drawn into the role of the moment. With Dostoyevsky, however, lines are absorbed into a gelatinous mass. Everything is unstable—and instability and abjection are bound by a secret pact. His characters tend to lose (or have already lost) their sense of attachment: to their family, to their class, but above all to society, as well as to their feelings, which they are ready to reverse at any moment, in a malevolent flash. They flow uncontained, and now almost with indifference: innocent yet depraved, compassionate in torture, their tears are followed by a wild mocking laugh.

The Ego and Its Own was on young Dostoyevsky's bookshelves. And the book passed around the Petrashevsky Circle, the perversely innocent group of subversives that would be broken up at gunpoint by the officers of Nicholas I, before being lost among the "houses of the dead." In Dostoyevsky's relationship to Stirner we find something far more serious than a mere legacy of ideas: the anthropological *monstrum* presented by Stirner will live on in Dostoyevsky's novels. *The Ego and Its Own* infuses a violent reagent into psychology: something that causes a detachment from all that is put forward as Law: above all, identity, the system of equivalences—and gradually everything as far as roles, class conventions, established feelings. In Dostoyevsky's novels there is a similar disruption among all that is human, the breath of whim, a turbid fluctuation between characters, an impossibility of tracing clearly defined lines. The mind

escapes from every cleft in the form of a cloud and envelops the city. The being that Stirner calls the ego is primarily a shapeless hollow: Dostoyevsky evokes from that hollow a multitude of faces: the underground man, who in his rightful anonymity incorporates to a certain extent all of them, but also Raskolnikov, Kirillov, Ivan.

Dostoyevsky lives underground in the same way that Zarathustra lives in his mountain cave. But he'll invite no "superior men" there. Instead, he waits for Stirner's *Unmensch*, for all that shuns the domesticated canon of the human, which the humanist torturers, upholders of "science and good sense," try to impose on humanity in the belief they are doing it good. From there his calm and devastating questions ring out: "But what makes you so sure not only that man can, but that he *must* be transformed?"; "Might it then be possible that man doesn't like well-being?"

Having reached Russia, having cast off his Hegelian cloak, Stirner could hardly resist a discussion "about sodden snow." The tone of the underground man comes from the sarcasm that the first readers of *The Ego and Its Own* in Berlin hadn't even noticed, so little had they understood the facts of life, and here it culminates: "We are oppressed at being men—men with a real individual body and blood, we are ashamed of it, we think it a disgrace and try to contrive to be some sort of impossible generalized man.[543] We are stillborn, and for generations past have been begotten, not by living fathers, and that suits us better and better. We are developing a taste for it. Soon we shall contrive to be born somehow from an idea." The style has become more insinuating, but we immediately recognize the voice of the ego. Here, too, as in Stirner, we are invaded by an element of constructed brutality, an unnatural immediacy, that is directed against *l'homme de la nature et de la vérité* (who is *l'homme dans toute la vérité de la nature* at the Beginning of Rousseau's *Confessions*). The underground man is in fact a product of alchemy, "not out of the lap of nature but out of a retort": But the artifice makes him even more violent, since he is more civilized ("The only gain of civilization for mankind is the greater capacity for variety of sensations—and absolutely nothing more"), it takes away that inborn stupidity of men who "persuade themselves, more quickly and easily than other people do, that they have found an infallible foundation for their activity." While he tosses and turns in his fetid clothes, the Underground Man, a perfect Western creation, still has the vice of epistemology: with a diamond chip he cruelly engraves the diaphanous matter of thoughts. He

discovers that he is the subject of the *rootlessness*, Shestov's *bespočvennost'* (*Bodenlosigkeit*, *déracinement* in Boris de Schloezer's French translation), and he protests: "Where are the primary causes on which I am to build? Where are my foundations? Where am I to get them from?" Like Stirner, the Underground Man has "founded his cause on nothing"—and there is a shrillness even in his voice.[544]

Behind the spite, the insults, the silences, we find that Marx and Stirner share a fundamental experience that affects their lives: the *spiritization* of the world. They were two young Germans, petty bourgeois with a natural tendency to degenerate into *Lumpen*—Stirner twice in prison for debt, Marx arrested in London on suspicion of theft on his way to pawn his wife's silver that bore the Argyll family crest. Both looked about them and saw a sarabande of ghosts. It was a time when the encroachments of philosophy (now called "critique" for reasons of secular decency), not to mention covetous science, were driving away shadows, hypostases, ideas, symbols, auras, categories, emblems from the world, dissolving them in crude daylight on the dissecting table; it was a time when the bourgeoisie were congratulating themselves that the Spirit was moving ever further away and was, in any event, becoming increasingly superfluous, so that it had to be invoked only at the unveiling of monuments, whereas machines were incessantly humming everywhere, except for backward Germany, and, since *Geschichte* (History) had become *Weltgeschichte* (World History), their blind movements, together with the rises and falls of the Stock Exchange, could determine the extinction of distant populations, whereas total disenchantment glided across the earth and stumbled over aureoles in the mud at crossroads; it was a time when the big body of the nineteenth century unknowingly performed its ruthless experiment upon itself, and was nonetheless convinced it was doing something quite different (and above all "shedding light"). In common with their time, Marx and Stirner shared the conviction that ghosts were a sign of evil (Guénon noted the regrettable coincidence by which spiritualism began to spread like an epidemic in the United States in 1848, a necessary counterbalance to the European barricades, which were in turn a quiet signal that a new character, Chaos, was emerging onstage at the Court of History). Their gaze settled on those specters, and was caught. But they resisted—and they scorned those around them who carried on in ignorance, convinced they were now living in an

empty world. "*Hypostases non fingo!*" Max Stirner declared, obsessively, from his desk at the school for young girls, as a whirl of categories pressed him to the wall. To this declaration—far more radical and effective than the earlier one pronounced by Newton—Marx replied with a shrug of the shoulders ("Huh! To imagine that thought determines reality, when it is reality that determines thought!" with the whole rosary of concomitant chiasmata), and he points his finger at concrete elements—account books, offices, warehouses, working hours, excise duties, gold, debentures, marauding ships. But it's a sham rejection: Marx's most rigorous application of Stirner's attack on hypostases comes a few years later, in the first book of *Das Kapital.* Stirner's words, which Marx himself had dismissed with rough impatience, would be tried out in those pages. Once reality has been stripped of every metaphysical veil and reduced to the bare production-circulation-consumer process, from which all other processes are derived and on which they model themselves, according to the axioms set out by Engels, then at that very moment the great dance of ghosts would begin—the great transformation of *Geist* into *Poltergeist*, which would grip hold of wardrobes and chairs, women, tablecloths, and all would become possessed. Stirner's only immediate continuator, the only faithful follower who has rigorously applied to concrete reality what the master had foreseen too generically, is therefore Marx in his *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital.*

There is one later follower—Nietzsche—who would be moved by similar ideas and would take a long time to express that violent opening imperative in a strategy. Having recognized the imaginary nature of every hypostasis, and the malevolent power of those fictions, instead of withdrawing into the barbarous silence of the "unnamable" and the "inexpressible" he would recognize figments (and therefore the hypostases), not only in every word and every action, but in every form and process of nature. And he would choose to deal with *all* figments as such, considering how they continually changed the terms of appearance, so that they would prevent it, however splendid and ocellated it may be, from being imperceptibly petrified into essence.

Over time, everything becomes part of the history of philosophy. In 1866, after twenty years of almost total obscurity, Stirner was named in two books that would long remain key references: Johann Edward Erdmann's *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (*Outlines of the History of*

Philosophy) and Friedrich Albert Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus* (*History of Materialism*). Stirner's new reputation would, indeed, be made from a passage in this latter "history." *The Ego and Its Own* reemerges from the regenerative silence as a "notorious work."[545] But Lange had been impressed to some extent by Stirner, so he added the words that turned out to be crucial: "this book—the most extreme that we know of its kind."[546]

The "magic of the extreme" ("the spell that fights on our behalf, the eye of Venus that charms and blinds even our opponents, this is the *magic of the extreme*, the seduction that everything extreme exercises: we immoralists—we are *the most extreme* …") would work once again.[547] In the summer of 1887, a young Scot, John Henry Mackay, would discover the name Stirner and that phrase for the first time while reading Lange's work at the British Museum. He noted it down. When he read *The Ego and Its Own* a year later, it seemed to him that humanity had found its redeemer in Stirner. He soon set off on the trail of the prodigious and by then unknown author. Marx and Engels had constructed "Marxism" and the "Marxist" piece by piece (without failing, of course, to denigrate those terms later) whereas Stirner did not construct the "Stirnerian," though he left some useful notions for his construction. He grew inexorably by himself: based on the model of the somewhat ridiculous and pompous Scot, he would be followed by countless others, from the workers of the black terror to the dandies of *La Revue blanche*. Mackay began work on his research for Stirner's biography, mobilizing all the mighty forces of spiritual kitsch ("for this book is life itself"), which at that time was gaining heights never again achieved.[548] Stirner sparked a further paradox. "Here we have Stirner's book, excessively mature and extremely blasé product of a long evolution, without even a hint of naivety, last fragment of crumbling Hegelianism, which was buried by criticism and ridicule. And on the other hand, Mackay as Stirner's biographer—boyish at heart, full of naivety, a fine, amiable soul, who has everything except a drop of humor and critical capacity." The destroyer of the "Cause" was now becoming the noblest "Cause," to be spread using every means: the object of sacrifice, of abnegation, of unswerving devotion.[549] First Mackay and then the awkward clan of Stirnerians would be a living example of those "pious atheists" whom Stirner had ridiculed in his book.

During the course of his mission, Mackay soon noticed something strange. He had published an announcement asking anyone who had had dealings with Stirner to contact him. Hardly any response. His leads vanished the moment they appeared. The information he received related to people who had died, those who had moved elsewhere, to files lost. Raising his head with puzzled dignity, Mackay wondered: "Must such a great life not also have been rich in exterior, great events?" Well, yes.[550] While Stirner's specter seems to have canceled every possible record of his life, not even a portrait (other than the sketch by his enemy Engels) and barely a signature, what little remains emerges in a clear and unambiguous light: that of drab penury, an anonymous and humiliating life that takes up just a line or two in the municipal records and the school archives. That was all, indeed, that Mackay could find.

His biographical researches went on for years. Only in 1898 did Mackay publish his *Max Stirner. Sein Leben und sein Werk* (*Max Stirner: His Life and Work*) in Berlin—so far, the only biography. In the meantime a "Stirner affair"—a venomous sequel of the "Nietzsche affair"—had blown up. And as Nietzsche's sister was nursing him at Weimar, allowing only a few select visitors to see him sitting glassy-eyed in his armchair, wrapped in a long thick white gown, likewise the pathetic Mackay wanted to be the First Apostle of Stirner. But arguments over precedence arise in every sect. Mackay was upset when the philosopher Eduard von Hartmann claimed it was he who had been the "rediscoverer" of Stirner through what he had written in *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (*Philosophy of the Unconscious*) of 1869, and *Phänomenologie des sittlichen Bewusstseins* (*Phenomenology of Moral Consciousness*) of 1879, though it was clear that Hartmann was elevating Stirner only to diminish Nietzsche. He was also upset by Paul Lauterbach's preface to the edition of *The Ego and Its Own* published by Reclam (from 1893 onward) in the Universal-Bibliothek series at just a few pfennigs, which marks Stirner's triumphal return among those authors who were required reading.

Lauterback's scholarly gesture of comparing Stirner with those writers with whom he seemed to have an "affinity" was regarded by Mackay as an act of lèse-majesté, for it had to be acknowledged, prior to all else, that Stirner's book was the gospel. Fortunately, there were now "individualist anarchists," and Mackay's friend Benjamin Tucker in the United States who had invented this term for the joy of all future historians of ideas. Stirner's

legacy, Mackay warned, rested in their "faithful and strong hands," rather like the way in which Marx and Engels entrusted their legacy to a proletariat whom they urged to be blunt and sincere.[551]

As for Nietzsche himself, though Mackay granted him a certain respect, he felt it rather wrong that Nietzsche's success had swept the rediscovery of Stirner along with it. How anyone could compare this "muddled spirit, who is repeatedly self-contradictory, almost helplessly tumbling from truth to error, with the deep clear, calm, and superior genius of Stirner," argued Mackay, "is an absurdity not worth serious refutation."[552] With his adjectives loaded with good and dull-witted intentions, Mackay built up a portrait of the Great Unknown Man. The more empty and insignificant his research into Stirner the person, the more enthusiastically he outlined a picture devoid of any reference to any provable reality—he had already piled up ex-votos around the miraculous image of the first completely ungodly human in history. In keeping with his character, and to make sure that "these exterior traces of his great life would not be wiped out," Mackay soon concerned himself with memorials.[553] In May 1892, with the support of Hans von Bülow, the only person who had known both Stirner and Nietzsche, he had a plaque put on the front of the house in Philippstrasse where Stirner had died. Inscribed on a slab of granite bought cheaply because it had an almost imperceptible crack, were the words: "In / this house / during his last days lived / Max Stirner / (Dr. Caspar Schmidt 1806–1856) / creator of the immortal work: / *The Ego and Its Own* / 1845." During his research, Mackay discovered that Stirner had never obtained the title of doctor of philosophy—nor indeed that of high school teacher. On his tomb, all that was inscribed were the words *Max Stirner*. The subscription for the plaque and the tombstone raised 438 marks, though they had cost 469.

Ida Overbeck: "Once, when my husband was out, Nietzsche stayed talking with me for a while and told me of two strange fellows he was interested in at that moment, with whom he felt he had an affinity.[554] Whenever he recognized certain inner connections, he was always lively and happy. Sometime later he found a book by Klinger in our house. My husband had not found Stirner in the library. 'Oh,' said Nietzsche, 'I was wrong about Klinger. He was a Philistine, I feel no affinity at all with him;

but Stirner, with him yes.' Meanwhile an air of solemnity passed across his face. And as I, all tense, watched his expression, it changed again, he made a gesture with his hand as if to dispel, to drive something away, and he sighed: 'Now I've said it, and I didn't mean to. Forget everything. They'll talk of plagiarism. But you won't, I know.' "

Why does thought need hypostases? Because it knows it has powers that leap over it. Hypostasis is an act of homage that thought offers to the realm of the imagination. Those allegorical figures, with their somber empty stare, statues that mark out the boundary of the intellect, are the last heirs of the angels and great creatures of the zodiac, which at one time plundered thought relentlessly. They still stand in a circle among wild grass, and everyone will soon forget they had a purpose: why, indeed, should thought remain closed inside a boundary? The unstoppable linear movement draws it in a straight line toward an unknown that is supposedly of the same nature as the known. The statues are forgotten, become covered in moss, before some nameless vandal knocks their heads off. Water lilies float silently in the pond at the center of the park. Hidden beneath the trickle of water is an obscure life that will soon bring death to the master of the garden.

Paradoxes: for everything to be a process, everything had to become a *thing*. ("Thing" is that which is *available*; "process" is a power capable of making anything whatsoever available.) And, for everything to become a thing, everything has to be definable, circumscribable, and *separable* from everything else.

Thing: is that which can be managed, which has a distinct outline, which is separate from the rest. The mechanism for the formation of hypostases is that which allows such an explanation, and fixing, of mental clouds. But hypostases were assigned a surplus of power over the subject, which made them unavailable for use but, instead capable of using their subjects. It was therefore a question of erasing the memory of that power, and reason once again was zealous. After all, its own life was at stake, or rather its tranquillity. Making fun of angels, over centuries of aggressive science, served this purpose above all.

"[The spirit] dwells in heaven and dwells in us; we poor things are just its 'dwelling,' and if Feuerbach goes on to destroy its heavenly dwelling and

force it to move to us bag and baggage, then we, its earthly apartments, will be badly overcrowded."[555] The prosaic nature of this move corresponds with Stirner's constantly derisive tone: to place the sublime in immediate contact not so much with the lowest but with the mediocre, with that tired daily ordinariness that ought now to take up all heaven and hell. And so, by giving Feuerbach a slight twist, Stirner turns the whole scene around: no longer the barrack-room speculation, but an unprecedented anthropological idea that defies all classification. At last we encounter something new in the table of variants in which the relationship between sacred and profane is usually inscribed: one of the opposing terms—the profane—demands to invite a caravan of gypsies laden with trinkets into its Biedermeier apartments for the sole reason that one of them claims to be a distant relative. There's a Feydeau farce in the making here, and Stirner is aware of it. And so he presents such a momentous event as a time of family confusion on the arrival of guests more numerous and irksome than expected. But this scene of domestic comedy is portentous nonetheless: the sacred demands a place to go, its miasmal and penetrating power can be confronted only by those who know how to contain it (with objects, supports, buildings, rituals, formulas). Nothing in the bourgeois *intérieur* is suited to such a task: the ornaments glare, the lids of ornamental boxes open, the curtains quiver, the wallpaper puckers, the tablecloths crepitate. The Guest passes through, leaves his marks, goes off toward the attic, turns into Odradek. From that moment, in the eyes of the child who would be Walter Benjamin, every object in the room becomes a totem. Hold your ear close, and you can still hear the sound of the Guest passing through. The walls are tattooed.

"What have we gained, then, when for a variation we have transferred into ourselves the divine outside us? *Are we* that which is in us?" The blaring trumpets of Humanity were then announcing continual conquests.[556] Everything was being stored up, and the individual contemplated the increase in his possessions with satisfaction. But *who* was taking over *what*? And what was the difference between taking over a category of thought and possessing a credit document? Possession seemed like a first step toward appropriation, which in turn could be regarded as total when it absorbed the entity appropriated without residue: *ablatio omnis alteritatis et differentiae* (the removal of all differences and otherness), in the words of

Nicholas Cusanus. But he was referring to the godlike soul, which is equated to the divine. Whereas here it was a question of equation to something that was extraneous by definition. And yet, even without allowing for the involvement of the divine, which always complicates matters terribly, and also leaving out all secular possession, appropriation nevertheless encounters various difficulties.

Our *own* body is itself extraneous to us: we can use it, or we can be mysteriously overwhelmed by it—yet we treat it as a multiplicity of extraneous entities. And the mind: can it not perhaps see itself as *another* thing? Indeed, isn't this its ineluctable characteristic? What else is that glorious notion of "self-awareness" to which the Spirit aspired, if not the total expansion of such capacity?

Let us take yet another step back: what is *ownness*? The answer to this question inevitably reveals all the ambitions, all the intentions concealed in thought. We open the *Upaniṣads* (though no one in Stirner's time was aware that Schopenhauer had just begun to read them). In the three words of *tat tvam asi* ("this you are"), *ownness* declares itself as the discovery of identification: extraneousness is one of the countless fruits of nonknowledge, which prevents the circulation of *ownness* in the Self. And that Self is everything. Yet nonknowledge remains that which is immediately our own. Paradoxes of a thought teeming with gods. Now, the emancipated reason of Feuerbach had only just appropriated the gods, and moreover in the euphemistic form of the "divine." It is clear that Feuerbach's subject had different aims from the subject of the *Upaniṣads*, with which in any case he was unfamiliar. What *ownness* was he seeking, then? For Feuerbach, a model of Man that was full of good sentiments and virtues. But Feuerbach is used here as a pretext, and it is certainly not in his moderate reasoning that we will find the answer of a godless age. Reasoning with no premises—every premise is extraneous—has fixed it into the area of inquiry in which it develops its greatest force: that of mathematical logic. *Own* is a term that belongs to a formalized theory. A formalized theory is a sequence of transparent statements, in the sense that each statement in the sequence is defined in all its elements and can be traced back, through rules of deduction, to a minimum number of initial statements (axioms). The formal system is a multiplicity where everything can only belong. But we know from Gödel's theorem that for formal theories of some interest (including arithmetic) there is no effective

procedure that makes it possible to decide whether a statement belongs to the same theory.

Thought without premises thus encounters insurmountable difficulty in the process of appropriation. And the theorem that reveals it is perhaps the thought from which that thought hangs by imperceptible threads. But it is not certain that the construction of the formal system is directed primarily toward appropriating logical consistency. Even thought from which the gods are absent has its paradoxes. Indeed, what is immediately striking about the formal system is its power. Arithmetic, which is the formal system on which Gödel demonstrated his theorem, cannot affirm its own consistency. But arithmetic is effective. And a formal system that works is also a machine that produces and amplifies power. Let us return to the construction of the formal system: what are its characteristics in relation to the rest of the world of propositions? First, the absence of premises: the formal system regards everything outside it as equal to zero. Second, it is arbitrary: any statement can be taken as a first proposition of a theory in a formalized system, provided that every constituent element is defined without a remainder. (In reality, there is always a remainder: the proposition $a=b$ is formed by the signs a,=, and b: "In the beginning was the sign," said Hilbert, and the phrase—inadvertently?—pointed to the fact that arbitrary choice can make everything transparent, but not itself.) The reduction of the surrounding context to zero and the arbitrary manner of setting the signs of the propositions in the formal system are two procedures of enormous power. Their application is not limited to the ambit in which such procedures appear in their pure form, which is the logico-mathematical sphere. Without the subject knowing it, these procedures act in all areas where thought has no premises. They act in their least pure, and of course their least consistent, forms: each time they are always more or less subtle or elaborate *simulations* of formal systems. But their purpose is not consistency, which moreover the formal system is unable to possess internally. These simulations aim at power—and they achieve it. Often to an extent that goes far beyond what is expected (precisely because they are simulations, therefore their elements are mixed with empirical data, they are not transparent—even if it is pretended they are, so long as the simulation holds). The formal system can be an impressive system of control, even though, inevitably, at a certain point in its development, it encounters an element that is entirely uncontrollable. But the hope is that such an element

doesn't cause too much practical disturbance. Arithmetic has indeed continued to make its contribution after Gödel's theorem. In simulated formal systems, uncontrollability appears in forms that are clearly much more drastic, even in terms of pure functioning. But the intoxication of power, up to that moment, is immense. In such intoxication, thought without premises finds its formulation in what is *its own*. *Own* is that which belongs to the area in which a form of power can be exerted. The power is gauged in terms of capacity to control. Control is produced by simulating pure formal systems, or by mixing simulations with pure formal systems. But are *we ourselves* the formal systems that act within us?

The seizure of divinity by man, this act of good administration demanded by the times, would bring great surprises when it came to taking stock. The inventory included not only Goodness and Power, virtues that pleased everyone, but certain characteristics that were somewhat antiquated, though impressive all the same. *Ego sum qui sum* were the first words of the divine, which now had to find a new place. Feuerbach wouldn't have dared to venture this far, nor would he have known how; but it was precisely from this point, with morbid consequentiality, that Stirner set out. The whole of *The Ego and Its Own* is above all an immense tautology and indeed an absurd aberration: a tautology built using all the tools of dialectics, as a correct transposition of the biblical pronouncement to the European adult of the nineteenth century. And here again one finds confirmation of a certain ineptitude among progressive minds: those who spoke out against religion were all convinced that religion was a collection of Virtues which should now be assembled in a public park. They of all people had failed to recognize the obvious: that religion contains within itself inexhaustible reserves of ambiguity and atrocity, more than enough to chip away the secular narrow-mindedness of professors, engineers, lawyers, and servants of the State who wanted to usurp it. And this is indeed what happened. Madmen would be born—ineffable, unspeakable, unique, from the prodigious power caged in larval bodies, shaken with torment. Teratology had become tautology, with a feeling of exhilaration.

Why is the "egoist" unique? Many of Stirner's readers have interpreted the term in the psychological sense: whether scorning or extolling it, they have imagined it was supposed to affirm the value of a self. But above all

the self of the egoist exists only as a negative and destructive power. On this point Stirner cut his links with earlier idealism no less distinctly than Marx. "When Fichte says, 'The ego is all,' this seems to harmonize perfectly with my thesis.[557] But it is not that the ego is all, but the ego *destroys* all, and only the self-dissolving ego, the never-being ego, the *finite* ego is really I. Fichte speaks of the 'absolute' ego, but I speak of me, the transitory ego." Stirner's ego is the negation that produces and abolishes, in an extremely rapid alternation, tending toward an impossible simultaneity. Anyone searching in Stirner for the reaffirmed substantiality of a subject will find instead an empty and silent cavity. So why then "egoist"? Instead of the Universal Man and Feuerbach's omnilateral man (then transmitted to Marx, and from there across the whole of history), Stirner wanted to construct in the egoist a hybrid monster that would evoke the disturbing image of fairy tales. The egoist, extrapolated from the pauper by a process that uses everything and allows only that which is usable, is the delirium of a *substitution* of the pauper to the process that has made him such. But it's a pure substitution: the subject is changed but the operation is unaffected. The egoist will also use everything and will substitute everything. But he will not manage to substitute his own figure, his compulsion to act in the same way as the process whose place he has taken. Likewise the principle of substitution cannot be exchanged with another principle. There is something at the very center of the despotic system of substitution that escapes it: the egoist (the pauper-despot) who is now identified with the process itself. The process is irreplaceable, in the same way that the egoist is irreplaceable. The system of exchange eventually clashes with itself as subject—and as a subject that is unexchangeable, unique, immeasurable. This wonderfully productive paradox is the motor that whirrs continually in our ears.

Ownness and the Alien. If this awkward couple is to remain in existence, an appropriate solution will be that of divorcing one term (the second, the bad one) in favor of the other. And this is what Marx intended when identifying Communism with the "destruction of alienness"—"with the communistic regulation of production and, implicit in this, the destruction of alienness …" But the method seems suspicious from the very beginning.[558] Too much love for Society, impertinent *avatāra* of the Whole. Stirner, who was likewise inclined to paranoia and brutality, though of a crude and garish kind, saw that among all historical figures only God (and

the despot who models himself on Him) was able to blur the distinctions between ownness and alien. All is alien to him because it is not God; all is ownness to him because God is "all in all."[559] Why not apply the same criterion to that unanchored, roaming ego that had no wish to occupy its place in Hegel's architecture? Like God, this ego would have been the supreme egoist, the only egoist who can make both meanings of *Sache* ("thing" and "cause") coincide with everything, thereby overcoming the common limitations of the egoist, who knows how to operate only in his own domain. But, having undergone such a contortion of meaning, whoever would now have considered ownness and alienness, except as something remembered from the desks of a Berlin lecture hall? Heading now, instead, toward an assimilation to the most prostituted being ("l'être le plus prostitué"), which is God, the being par excellence ("l'être par excellence"), who never tires, out of love, of going out of himself ("sortir de soi") and can only go out into himself.[560] Marx also foresees this possibility: "Universal prostitution appears as a necessary phase in the development of the social character of personal talents, capacities, abilities, activities.[561] More politely expressed: the universal relation of utility and use." Stirner develops this notion to an extreme: we use everything as our own and are used in everything by everyone. Coexistence of maximum ownership (everything is our material) and maximum alienness (we are the material used by everyone) but intertwined in universal prostitution, many steps beyond Sade, still encumbered by certain feudal memories of sovereignty. In the good old days of Kant it could still be decided by law what belonged to a person and what didn't, but now everything is both at the same time—above all the ego, which claims to have everything at its disposal, and who is at the disposal of all.

The blind rage that Marx hurls upon the *Lumpen* is followed by the rage he displays toward unproductive workers. Maintaining with paleo-bourgeois zeal the distinction posited by Adam Smith, Marx includes in it the whole "rabble," "from whore to pope."[562] And in the *Grundrisse*—the work that prepares the grave for the whole mighty conception of productive labor, insofar as it speculates upon the phase that we are approaching today, in which the productive worker ends up being transformed into "an overseer and regulator of the production process itself"—the unerring faith in the metaphysical structure of production (far more than to its historical

manifestation) would drive Marx to evident bombast in defending the distinction between Smith and those servile economists who want to convince the bourgeois "that it is productive labor when somebody picks the lice out of his hair, or strokes his [cock], because for example the latter activity will make his *blockhead* clearer the next day in the office."[563, 564] Marx is concerned not just with a technical distinction, which is helpful in highlighting the specific nature of salaried work (a "form … which has replaced the very earth as the ground on which society stands").[565] More important, for him, is to identify with the process of capital in the treacherous hostility to unproductive powers, which embody the immeasurable: the sacrament, pleasure, sovereignty. And here, in the silent simultaneous monologue of their notebooks, Baudelaire replies: while Marx had lowered sacrament to the level of prostitution, Baudelaire invokes prostitution as a sacrament: "L'amour, c'est le goût de la prostitution" (Love is a passion for prostitution).[566]

Whore-Pope-*Lumpen*: this is the Trinity of prostitution that Baudelaire was also identifying (his *Fusées* are datable to the years 1855–1862; Marx's *Grundrisse* to 1857–1858). In their supremacy, all are *vicars* of God: "l'être le plus prostitué, c'est l'être par excellence, c'est Dieu"; "The being most prostituted is the being par excellence, it is God."[567] Having only one area of manifestation, they do not achieve that global and perpetual prostitution which is the sign of divinity. Whether the *Lumpen* then appear as paupers, as dandies, or as poets makes little difference. They are, in any case, beings with no dignity (if anything, they have majesty). What takes away their dignity is their very admission of contact with something extra-social and self-sufficient, truly nefarious: pleasure, the invisible, the gratuitousness of art. (The writer is a member of the *Lumpen* as soon as he talks about art for art's sake: an insolent response, in cracked falsetto, to his loss of status: he no longer has a purpose at Court, so he rejects all purpose.)

Un frisson nouveau

Modernity and *nerves* find their definitive voice in Baudelaire's notes (even though the Goncourt brothers would later write, with defiant vanity: "We were the first to write about nerves").[568] The German romantics were still talking about ideas, but here a theological aside mingles with the smells of the streets, the nausea of manifestos, the incidents of city life, a summary of debts, a recipe for Icelandic lichen. A dreary personal sideshow, while the same old performance continues onstage. An obsession about the names of newspaper editors, a "list of villains" ("liste de canailles").[569] Burke's sublimity, the "delights of chaos and immensity," are now camped at the crossroads, appearing at every step are the gaping chasms that people went to see in Switzerland and belonged then to memories of the Grand Tour.[570] One walks beneath "the square sky of solitudes," in the savanna of the mind.[571] At times "the voice of the adjective pierced me to the bone."[572]

Nerves first emerge as a historical subject with Baudelaire's generation. As if, indeed, nerves had not run through the body, had not given those shudders, those shocks that are now felt with dismay, with delight. It is the first sign of the final fixation of the Spirit—first sonorous, then luminous, then all-embracing, then aural, then vaporous, and finally simply nervous—in the network of the Body. And this passage to the Body inevitably goes with an urge to *experiment* on the Body. For this, the Spirit has to be fixed in a certain place in order to have an effect on it. This is the crossroads, the meeting place for all praxes, all kinds of aestheticism (which are projects of great industrial enterprises, the first seeds of the whole impressive apparatus of the media, from the salon of Des Esseintes to the palace courtyards of Cecil B. De Mille), all positive sciences, all organizations, all systems of education. The new thought of the age is all assembled in one point: no longer to have *one* thought, but to *act* on every thought—and from this action to consider the thought that emerges. The most convincing action, it is supposed, will be the most effective. And the most effective action, consequently, will be considered by the most appropriate thought.

The treacherous Sainte-Beuve advised Baudelaire (in December 1861) to write a formal letter presenting himself as a candidate for the Académie. It had to be addressed to the Secrétaire Perpétuel de l'Académie Française, who at that time was Abel Villemain, the man whom Baudelaire regarded, more than anyone else, as the natural embodiment of Stupidity—("I have a passion for Stupidity").[573] The letter was written with much agitation and innuendo ("To be entirely honest, the main reason that leads me to solicit your votes at this very moment is that, if I decided to solicit them only when I felt myself worthy, I would *never* solicit them"—we note "the grammatical dance" in using *solicit* three times in four lines).[574, 575] When Baudelaire dutifully visited Alfred de Vigny, who was one of the forty academicians, Vigny shook his large noble head. It was a faux pas, unpardonable, he said. Too often he'd heard it whispered: "We'll make that one bow and scrape, and in the end we shall not elect him."[576] And meanwhile he made a mental note: "It seems Baudelaire exists in literature only as a translator of this philosophical novelist [Poe].[577] Distinguished and suffering appearance of a studious and hardworking man." But he still had to visit the enormous Villemain, "*enormis loquacitas*," "the hatred of a *mediocre* man is always an *immense* hatred."[578] Baudelaire listened as Villemain lectured him "with indescribable solemnity" about *Les Paradis artificiels*: "Toxicology, Monsieur, is not Morality!" Baudelaire records the phrase in masterly style, introducing two sarcastic capital letters.[579] Ever childish, Baudelaire notes to himself: "I'll make him pay dearly for it."[580] They said good-bye as follows: "*M. Villemain*, *with insistence*: I've never had any originality myself, Monsieur.[581] *M. Baudelaire, ingratiating*: Monsieur, how would you know?"

Uno Harva (Holmberg)[582]

The act of pouring milk or sprinkling fermented horse milk over the back of the sacrificial animal recalls the custom practiced in the Volga region where it is established whether the sacrifice is appreciated by pouring water over the victim. The shudder of the animal indicates a positive response. This at least is what the Yellow Uighurs recount: they pour "white water" *(ak su)*, namely water mixed with milk, over the back of the sacrificial lamb and the quiver that it causes is seen as evidence that the sacrifice is acceptable to the god. What is more, a word in the Mongol language, borrowed from Chinese, which describes the act of pouring acquavit or water into the ears

of a sacrificial pig, shows us that a corresponding custom is also known here.

Karl Meuli[583]

Σείου σὺ ταχέως, "shake yourself immediately!" cries Aristophanes's Trygaeus to his sacrificial lamb: by shaking its head it has to give its consent. The Delphic god had quite clearly told Episcopus: only a sheep that spontaneously agrees can be a proper sacrifice. In the time of Plutarch this rule was still scrupulously followed, and Daphnis, for example, pours milk and wine over the head of his sacrificial animals, as was done to obtain the necessary gesture of consent. Water could also be put into the ear. For a sacrifice at Delphi it was not enough for the animal to shake its head: the animal had to shudder in order for Pythia to pronounce the oracle.

Baudelaire: "The sacrifice is complete only with the *sponte sua* of the victim."[584]

"[Baudelaire] was also proud of these words by a great poet: 'You have endowed the sky of art with a sort of macabre ray: you create *un frisson nouveau*.' "[585] Baudelaire was proud of these words not only because they were written by Victor Hugo (about whom he harbored no illusions: "he woos everyone and *treats as a poet* the first and the last to arrive"), but because they were *those* words: the "frisson nouveau" was the New, which, "au fond de l'Inconnu" (in the depth of the Unknown), encountered the shudder, the most ancient, the too familiar (and hence effaced) memory of the sacrifice.[586] From that time, the encounter is repeated every day, like the sudden irruption of leopards into the temple: "in the end it can be foreseen and becomes a part of the ceremony."[587]

Behind the Glass

Max Ophüls had tried to convey it in his films through many devices: an iron grating, a windowpane, a half-open blind, a piece of lace, a curtain that

the camera lens has to brush past. Or perhaps just a bundle of objects that distance and frame the characters. Or perhaps the vast fringe of darkness that shrouds them. Then, finally, he referred in a radio interview to this text, which, in just a few words, describes the film image: “Anyone who looks through an open window from outside never sees all the things that are seen by someone looking through a closed window.[588] No object is more profound, more mysterious, more fertile, more somber, more dazzling than a window illuminated by a candle. What you see in sunlight is always less interesting than what is going on behind a windowpane.” This is the voice of Baudelaire, but also of Ophüls, his cinematographic heir. The screen image appears in an age in which mental images tend to invade the streets and become transformed into raw perceptions, acceptable to any empiricist. During this invasion some images are captured on the screen—and there they continue to lead a double life. Their esotericism, which is at the heart of great cinema, wants them to remain in contact both with their mental origin as well as with their ultimate release into the streets. This result is represented by Baudelaire’s “open window,” by the illusion of a continuity between inside and outside, of a life that remains intact on two dimensions. But the other path, which is directed to the origin, takes the image back onto the screen of the mental image, therefore to the image “behind the glass,” which appears to “someone looking through a closed window.” The window of the mind can be the surface of the mirror, or the transparency of the lace curtain, or the frame provided by objects and by darkness: all signals of an imperceptible and unbridgeable distance between the world and its reflection, between the two perpetual sources of the image. “Behind the glass,” the light emanating from beings and objects is no longer a light of nature, but the radiance of the surface itself: the radiance of Psyche.

And meanwhile, “it hasn’t yet been established what illness Flaubert died from.”[589] Laforgue in Berlin was pondering this point, while his voice was flowing over the pages that Empress Augusta was asking him to read, skipping here and there over the impertinent passages. He graciously accepted his role as a rather chlorotic lady-in-waiting, custodian of boredom like “the clock of a deserted railway station.”[590] But in his physiology, the great philosophical terms, always high-sounding (Will! Renunciation! Schopenhauer! Hartmann!), underwent a rich change, degenerating into illustrations from a biological atlas. The concepts were quietly crouching

behind a sheet of glass, no longer directed toward Hyperuranion, but suspended in the Berlin aquarium. “Before the atonic, sated, sober, buddhist gaze of the crocodiles, of the pythons (the ophidians), etc.[591] How I understand those old races of the Orient that had exhausted all meanings, all temperaments, all metaphysics.” And there was something that went even further: “the ideal is these sponges, these starfish, these plasmas in the cool, dull, all dreamlike silence of the water.”[592] It was Debussy’s piano that covered a now empty thought, corroding it beneath its band of sound.

In that “critical age in which some people tend toward the ironic and sour, others toward the insipid and sugary, and yet others toward the vulgar,” in the first official age of the bourgeoisie, the years of Louis Philippe and of disappointment—here a curtain descends, edged in black, though still transparent, separating the present from the past.[593] The present certainly gives cause for concern, if only because it is gross, massive, but it no longer has the aesthetic decorum of history. A new dimension of dreariness is born. Sensitive beings were struck for the first time by a sense of foreboding that the world around might even be ugly forever. Someone suggests, on the other hand, that history means scenery, costumes, and ruinous passions. And every history, now, tends inadvertently to be transformed into a Ludwig II of Bavaria in disguise, talking aloud to the Names in the archives. Spiritualism, after 1848, becomes the basis for even the most rigorous studies—until a recent historian, Robert Darnton, would recognize there, almost as if it were something obvious, the special vocation of his profession: “The reconstruction of worlds is one of the historian’s most important tasks.[594] He undertakes it, not for some strange urge to dig up archives and sift through old paper, but because he wants to talk with the dead.”

After the fall of Napoleon an insidious and imprudent feeling begins to circulate: that passions, grand gestures, and the perpetual drama of the soul now belong to the stage or to the past, but not to the events of the day. Any display of it is now overlaid, like a levy, by a deep sense of inadequacy, a general tinge of mediocrity. So every feverish Julien Sorel dreams about Napoleon’s victories as the final picture of the past; and every Joseph

Delorme will nurture his hypochondria with a rejection of the present. A new breed concerns itself above all with eliminating all personal semblance of contact with the world. To cut links, to distance the heart, and finally to sabotage. From the dandy to the nihilist conspirator, young Barrès, black or white esotericism, Ludwig II, the flight to the Orient, spleen and rancor, silent exaltation, heightened perception—all appear as solitary points, dim lights that form the constellation of contempt: they are Gobineau's *Pléiades*, calendars, wandering dervishes who tell interconnected stories, children of kings often born in small apartments, sometimes crippled by fortune. They meet at the table of an inn, on their restless Grand Tour, and the few words they exchange are enough to alert them: perhaps the acquaintance they have only just met, this artist who does not let his hair fall on his shoulders, who dresses like everyone else, who is naturally well mannered, who gives nothing away in his appearance—perhaps he, too, is the son of a king. And so it happened, recounts Gobineau, that Conrad Lanze met Wilfrid Ore on the boat for Arona, after having crossed the St. Gotthard Pass, among the dust and rhododendrons, together with Louis de Laudon, whom he had met two weeks before in Zurich, where they had been "taken by a fine love for each other."[595]

If we must indeed find a distinction between what can be said about *modernity* and all we find in every previous age—isn't it perhaps a certain capacity that it has to be swept along by form or gesture, to disregard limits even when it expressly defends them, to invade every off-limits area, perhaps with the excuse of guarding it from all abuse? Why do we regard Joseph de Maistre as so akin to his hated Voltaire? Why does Pascal converse as a brother with the most unbelieving moralists? It is a certain *disregard for the consequences*, moving impulsively and with the pleasure of roving, rapacious, reckless movement: *eris palpans in meridie*—you shall grope about at noonday.

Sainte-Beuve's balanced and equanimous tone cost him a continual congestion of the black humors in his circulation: his capillaries became poisonous coral. We find them pasted into the *Cahier vert* that Sainte-Beuve wanted to fall "only into friendly hands," and which has so far fallen mainly into indifferent hands.[596] Few people have noticed the "very dark and very thick base of the palette," which served to fix those pieces of gossip that

couldn't be published for reasons of decency, *par bienséance*, just as much as to thicken clots of confession that could never be dissolved verbally, *par bienséance*.[597] On the other hand, those isolated, laconic words conceal a pathos that suspends them in the void, or against the background of his "arsenal of vendettas," like the spare chapters of the only novel written by Sainte-Beuve: the Cautious Journey of a Delicate Soul toward Desolation:[598]

"All of my organs have reached such a state of wear and are, so to speak, in such a *threadbare* state that I no longer allow myself to exert any of them."[599]

"… recently, rereading Theocritus, I felt *my pastoral soul* reawaken within me, that soul of the golden age covered over by so many layers of bronze, of earth and of lead …"[600]

"… our heart has all the skins of the snake, the seven double folds, like impenetrable shields."[601]

"I have been a thieving youngster, I will be an old pirate.[602] Oh, how I would prefer to be a good literary gentleman who lives on his lands in a state of poetry!"

"There is no corruption worse than that of tender hearts and mystics."[603]

"I am the vainest and weakest of beings; and it's precisely the combination of my weaknesses that gives me the air of a wise man; each weakness undoes the other."[604]

"Living in a vast city in a century of corruption and wild ambition, in the midst of a literature with insatiable pretensions, of abominable vices, outrageous and full of filth, I worked hard from the start to develop as far as possible, within me, the faculty of contempt.

"—then, having done this, after a certain time there's no more need to worry about it; one has already moved on to indifference."[605]

"Why do I no longer love nature, the countryside? Why do I no longer love strolling along narrow footpaths? I'm well aware that they're exactly the same, but now *there's no longer anything behind the hedge*."[606]

On September 7, 1847, Sainte-Beuve wrote to François Collombet: "Chateaubriand is more silent than ever: he lives in his dreams.[607] His fine mouth still smiles, there are tears in his eyes, his broad peaceful brow has all its majesty. But what is there inside and below? And is there indeed anything?"

After a failed cataract operation, Madame Récamier was by now almost blind and lived in darkness. Outside, the barricades of 1848, the abdication of Louis Philippe, the proclamation of the Republic. The visitor groped his way into the main room of the Abbaye-aux-Bois, where the furniture had been arranged for years in geometrical and hierarchical patterns. The shutters and the curtains were closed. From the doorway, a blade of light stretched into the semi-darkness, but it was not enough to guide his steps, until Madame Récamier's voice came to his aid, prompting him to move toward the large screen that concealed her armchair. Chateaubriand sat down beside her, immutably silent.

Bien-aimé

Louis XV knew from the very start that, whatever he did, he was a "roi de perdition." And this gave him a harsh, cold intolerance that courtiers felt with trepidation, even when he was a child. His primordial sentiment, much more than boredom, was mischief: irritation at finding himself in one of those points where history was tightening its grip and leaving no room for escape. It was as though his existence had run its course before he had lived it. He felt the impossibility of being anything other than dissolute, indolent, and spiteful. And even if he'd been willing to fight it, he imagined he would be cut down, and no one would have been surprised, in the same way that he was said to have cut down the fortunes of some of his subjects, without anyone being surprised.

Madame du Hausset records that it hurt him to laugh: at most he could force a smile. And that smile meant: "we will grant you anything, provided you don't expect our attention." With dull pedantry, which destroyed his natural elegance, he repeated the same stories several times, never finding anyone who could make him realize what boredom it produced. He is credited with many fairly banal *bons mots* that are admired for their wit, whereas certain remarks of devastating lucidity are cited as expressions of his patent lack of decorum. He was obsessed about idle kings ("rois fainéants"), and Cardinal Fleury, who coerced him to inaction, while exhorting him to maintain some semblance of activity, was once imprudent enough to speak to him about it. "One day I reached the point of telling the king that there had been certain kings of France who had been deposed because they did nothing.[608] It seemed to affect him deeply. He made no reply at the time, but two days later he said: 'I have reflected on what you told me about certain of my predecessors who were deposed—but tell me, when those sovereigns were deposed, did they get good pensions?' "

"… in the small apartments of Versailles, he appeared like a big and gloomy and sad child, with something in his spirit that was cold, malicious, sarcastic …"[609]

The Parc aux Cerfs, whose name alone invited resentful subjects to dream of continual, cloistered lechery, was "a fairly poor house with a tiny garden, closed off in the cul-de-sac of rue des Tournelles and rue Saint-Médéric; it consisted of four bedrooms and several small sitting rooms, and could accommodate two or three women at most, indeed it seemed designed to accommodate just one."[610] The house bore that name because it was built, during the time of Louis XIII, in a district on the edge of Versailles where there was a park of wild animals. It was inhabited not by thousands of round-breasted gopis pining for Krishna but by one or two girls at a time, waiting for the visits of an unknown lord, who sometimes passed himself off as a Polish gentleman and forgot to remove his blue sash. And every so often, for a month or so, the house was even empty. In that place, absolutist whim ended up establishing the foundation for a very bourgeois institution: the kept woman. And even Madame de Pompadour, who oversaw such pleasures, later administering births and pensions, went as far as coining a maxim that regulated the countless future ménages of lesser rank: "It is his

heart that I want."[611] As for the rest, she was relieved to forgo it. She would no longer have to eat chocolate with triple vanilla and truffles for breakfast, to rouse her "very cool temperament," seeing that "men, as you well know, attach such importance to certain things."

Louis XIV declares: "L'État, c'est moi"—"I am the State."[612] A courtier tells Louis XV: "Tout cela est à vous—All of that is yours." These are the devilish words of Villeroy, whom Hugo singles out in *La Pitié suprême* to explain his grim compulsion to omnipotence. Then, having tired of lines such as "Sanche! Alonze! Clovis! Sennachérib! Cambyse!," Hugo sets about describing the chronic situation of Louis XV as none of the king's contemporaries had managed: "Une stupide joie avec un vaste ennui—A stupid pleasure with a vast boredom." Only Louis XV's enemy, his opposite, had words free of resentment.[613], [614] When the king died and not even his coffin could properly seal his fetid remains, transported in haste, spurning of all ceremony, at night, with an air of merriment, to Reims, only Frederick the Great was able to write to Voltaire what was sadly evident: that wretched man was *un honnête homme* whose only fault was to be king. Cardinal de Bernis, with forlorn courtesy, had written something similar in a letter which is a threnody for the Seven Years' War: "I love the King, and I grieve for him with all my heart; an *honnête homme* capable of friendship and desiring only good, he allows evil to be done and to tarnish the splendor of a reign that could have been glorious and peaceful."[615]

"The end of every dynasty is marked by a king ignoring government to devote himself to dissipation. Nature announces his fall with inauspicious signs (comets, two suns, earthquakes, floods, diseases, etc.). In China, as we know, it is through the people that Heaven reveals its will to withdraw its mandate (*ming*) from the reigning king (revolution, songs of spirited young men). The dissipation of the king, however, is not just a simple expression of immoral conduct. It expresses the will to secure for his own profit all property, all power. … … …

"The 'rois de perdition,' in their arrogance, sought to reach Heaven building nine-storey towers, but also digging deep cellars.[616] Their conduct can be construed as an exceptional exaggeration of a normal spirit of celebration (if we think of the winter drinking sessions of the peasants). The wrong is not in the action itself, but in its 'disproportion.' It consists in

doing too much and too often what can and must be done on certain occasions."

We'll never know much for sure about his dissipation, in the same way that we won't know much for sure about his childish games. But one account describes how, at the age of seven, they amused him by filling a vast room with sparrows and suddenly releasing hawks that ripped them to pieces with their sharp beaks. Another account describes how "the king had a white fawn that he fed and nurtured, which ate from his hand and was very fond of the king; he had it taken to La Muette and said he wanted to kill it.[617] He had it sent a distance away and he shot and wounded it. The fawn dragged itself toward him and nuzzled him; once again he had it sent a distance away and he shot it a second time and killed it. His act seemed very cruel. There are other similar stories about him, involving certain birds that he has at Passy."

In politics, Louis XV had only one abiding objective: that of conspiring against his government. He is the first king who chooses to place himself in the role of provocateur. The Secret of the King was a parallel policy that often caught him out in his own secrets. The Duc de Broglie, who made the first attempt to reconstruct this vain and acrobatic story of multiple deceptions, records one exemplary moment—when, in 1773, Louis XV, while plotting behind the scenes with Sweden, "had full satisfaction: needing to conduct an affair that was half-diplomatic and half-military, he succeeded in hiding one part from the minister of war, the other part from the foreign minister, and finally the whole of it from the person to whom he generally entrusted his secret policies.[618] Three secrets carried on together, unconnected one from the other, were the crowning achievement of his system and a work of genius of its kind." Then, when Louis XV succeeded even in deceiving his secret confidants, revealing part of the secret to his ministers, who had always played the role of the dupe, a sort of paralyzing peace hovered over him. All external purpose had faded before the evidence of the king's trick, which forced him to play all and everything against himself, and thus to betray the betrayers whom he had chosen. The strands of the plot, once brought together, neutralized one another—and left in the middle of it was the lone, powerless sovereign: whether or not he resorted to hypochondriac inaction or to feverishly covering his tracks, he was thwarted at every turn, and was now damned.

Of all Louis XV's bastard children, the son of Mademoiselle de Romans was honored with an evocative name. From Versailles, one December day, the king sent one of his very few intimate notes, which has since passed through the hands of many collectors: "I am well aware *ma grande* that you had some idea in your head when you left, though I couldn't guess exactly what it was.[619] I do not want our child to be under my name on the certificate of baptism, but nor do I want to be unable to recognize him in a few years' time, if I so wish. I therefore want it to be put down as Louis Aimé or Louise Aimée, son or daughter of Louis Le Roy or of Louis Bourbon, as you prefer … I also want the godfather and the godmother to be poor people, or servants, excluding anyone else."

Louis XV called Mademoiselle de Romans "ma grande"—according to the perceptive eye of Sophie Arnould—because "nature, abandoning its rules of good taste, had pleased itself to make a great exaggeration. Mademoiselle de Romans had a comely figure, and everything about her was in perfect proportion, but that perfection was colossal … The king himself, who was a very handsome man, looked like a schoolboy or half a king beside her."[620] Louis XV went too often to visit her at Passy, and too often he had a carriage and six horses sent to collect her. Choiseul, his minister, began to be concerned about possible political consequences; Madame de Pompadour was alarmed. Only the Maréchale de Mirepoix could find arguments to reassure her: "I certainly won't say that he loves you more than her, and if with the wave of a magic wand she could be transported here and were at dinner this evening and everyone were aware of her tastes, then you would perhaps have reason to worry.[621] But princes are, above all, men of habit; the King's friendship for you is the same that he has for your apartment, for what is around you; you have adapted to his ways, to his affairs; with you there is no embarrassment, he has no fear of boring you; how can you imagine he'd have the courage to upset all this in a single day, to settle down in a totally different world, and to make a public spectacle of himself with such a great change of decoration?" But Madame de Pompadour's fear was tinged with curiosity: once the bastard was born, it was said that Mademoiselle de Romans went to the Bois de Boulogne, dressed in lace, with the infant in a wicker basket, and breast-fed him there, on a secluded path. One day Madame de Pompadour, preceded by her trusty Madame du Hausset, her face concealed by her bonnet and by a

handkerchief that she kept over her mouth, pretended to be passing casually along the same path. Mademoiselle de Romans was breast-feeding, her jet-black hair held back with a diamond-encrusted comb. Madame du Hausset approached her and said: " 'What a pretty child.'[622] 'Yes,' she replied, 'I can say so myself, though I'm the mother.' Madame, who was holding my arm, was trembling, and nor did I feel too confident. Mademoiselle de Romans said: 'Do you live nearby?' 'Yes, Madame,' I said, 'I live at Auteuil with this lady, who at this moment has terrible toothache.' 'Oh, I am sorry, it's a pain I've suffered much myself.' "

The king soon grew tired. His archers came to take away the child so that he would be brought up far from his mother. There were many letters of complaint and recrimination from the mistress who had fallen into disgrace. But Busby Berkeley's remark was true at Versailles long before Hollywood: "There is no comeback for a has-been." There was nothing to do but await her son's future: when Louis XV died, she let the new king have the boy's certificate of baptism—and the fourteen-year-old Abbé de Bourbon was received at Court. Many saw in him the slim and graceful figure of Louis XV. While he waited for a position in some prosperous abbey, the bastard was sent to Rome, to Cardinal de Bernis, the last of the four great cardinals who had governed France and now, at his palace on the Corso, entertained passing French nobility. He welcomed the Abbé de Bourbon with kindness, with affection, with "that blend of affability and refinement, of nobility and of simplicity" for which Madame de Genlis declared him to be "the most amiable man I have ever known."[623] But in Paris they were already forgetting the young abbé of royal stock. There was no more talk of abbeys —and they stopped sending him money. He wandered around Italy. Bernis, his last protector, felt grieved: "He is the Wandering Jew.[624] It pains me to see a man who bears such a name drifting idly around all the inns of Italy; he must either be forbidden to hold such an illustrious name or be more respected in his person. I confess that on this point, and on several others, my thoughts are somewhat old-fashioned, indeed I am myself old-fashioned." During his aimless wanderings, the Abbé de Bourbon died of chicken pox in Naples.

Sometime later, Madame Louise, a Carmelite nun and half-sister of the Abbé de Bourbon, described how she had met Abbé Turlot, who had been with him when he died: "The other day we talked about the poor Abbé de Bourbon … Such is the world: he's been dead six months and he's no

longer remembered.[625] I would so like to have a short epitaph written for him, just for it to be known who he was, but I'll have to discuss it …" Less than a year later, Madame Louise would herself be dead and her plan came to nothing.

Images, for a long time, belonged to a cosmic liturgy that followed the course of the sun in the Zodiac. And for a short time they inhabited the ceremonies that escorted the sun of sovereignty. Having descended from the heavens, they settled in a mezzanine at Versailles. They were often left abandoned there, like a tedious provincial relative who talks about people entirely unknown. From that humiliating confinement they were dislodged as soon as the revolutionary crowd began to stir. Some ended up on the ends of pikes, others worshipped in Egyptian rites. No one understood whether all was tending toward triumph or persecution. It was tending toward both: but there was no longer a *templum*. Once the zodiacal belt was undone, each image now wandered in ever vaster cities, its tribe forgotten, ready to be attracted, to be plundered everywhere: in living rooms, abbeys, newspaper offices, satanic mills, ruins, American forests, suburbs. A new, uncontrolled, clandestine, contagious life began for them: for years they met at the crossroads of the mind, and at times they recognized a certain familiar air, the impression of a shared past. But they barely had time to stop before a violent gust urged them onward, along other paths, in a perpetual migration.

> We smiled at the trimmed hedges,
> at the curved Chinese roofs,
> at the porcelain ringlets,
> at the silk tails–
> yet in moments of empty tiredness,
> lifting a hand to our head
> we felt something missing,
> a powdered wig.

(For a long time, it wasn't clear what belonged to the *templum* and what didn't. An incessant mumbling came from the past centuries, from that last and now immense *fin de siècle* that begins with libertine dryness and the almost criminal recklessness of the Regency or—if we want an earlier cosmic setting—with the "untuned" heavens of Donne and with the disordered "degrees" lamented by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, and

perhaps it is now verging on its final end. A breath of modernity that was preparing itself to be scattered. It was hard to contain that mumbling, to find a frame sufficiently well cultivated and conceived, yet not too conspicuous, as a frame must be, but made of substance which would then turn out, when studied closely, to be a pigment of the painting itself. At that point, Talleyrand emerged. Hadn't Brichot said, in the halls of salon Verdurin, that it was he who had been the first of the *fin de siècle*? Talleyrand then offered another advantage: of having no ideas, and still fewer opinions, but of having an obscure, murky remnant of that kind of wisdom that merely "hints.")

A Visit to Picpus

Close to the Hôpital Rothschild, where the suburbs of Paris woo desolation, was the rest home for single ladies, run by sisters dedicated to the perpetual adoration of the Sacred Heart. In the courtyard, Brother and Sister were sitting on a wooden bench. The Sister, a resident at the home, was being visited by her devoted Brother. Over the melancholy protuberance of her eyes, her hair was still bobbed in twenties style, while a few surviving pieces of family jewelry around her wrists and neck defended the dignity of a *dame en retraite*. The Brother was waiting for the moment to talk about expenses and receipts. He pulled an empty ring case from his pocket and offered it to his Sister—perhaps she might find it useful. The Sister ran a finger slowly across the silk lining: "It's in good condition," she said. But they had also to pretend to talk about other matters. They were waiting on the bench for the gatekeeper, who took occasional groups into the cemetery of the "Victims of the Revolution" just behind the gate of the rest home.

"To whom does the cemetery belong?" asked the Brother.

"La Société Immobilière et Civile de l'Oratoire du Cimetière de Picpus," replied the Sister. "They're the heirs of the victims. Only they can be buried in the cemetery. They're the families of aristocrats."

“But there weren’t just aristocrats. As I was waiting I looked in the chapel at the list of victims in the mass graves. There are all kinds. Tradesmen, lawyers, ordinary people …”

“Ah yes, nearly all the aristocrats had already been killed off …”

“There must have been much settlings of scores, jealousies, accusations …”

“They used to be carried here on tumbrels from the Place de la Nation. One thousand, three hundred and six of them …”

“Even at the end of the war there must have been much settlings of scores, jealousies, accusations. Then they had them killed, and that was the end of it …”

A lady from the rest home interrupted them.

“It’s hot today. So humid …”

“Yes, it’s been like this for a few days …” said the Sister.

“It’s so nice to have visits …”

“My brother …”

“I have a sister too. But she only comes when it suits her.”

The Brother had a tremulous smile on his moist, ruddy gray face. He was poorly shaved. His suit, too heavy, was of a kind no longer seen in the shops.

“Brothers are better than sisters,” he said. “They look after many practical problems, provide a little help …”

Another waiting visitor came to sit on the bench, a small frail old man, wearing a light-colored cloth beret. When he smiled, three long yellow solitary teeth appeared. For several years he had spent his days visiting historic places in Paris, and on that oppressive August day he had come to the Picpus Cemetery. He was interested not in beauty, only in history.

“I’m for history, one hundred percent,” he repeated at the first opportunity. Cemeteries and plaques were history and nothing else, so these were his favorites. At the end of the visit, the custodian, a gloomy man driven from his farm in Algeria, who often confused his lost Africa with the ancien régime, said a few words about the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne who had died for their faith on July 17, 1794. He mentioned the books by Lenotre that he had on display at the gatehouse for anyone wishing to purchase a souvenir. Then, for the first time, the little old man turned to the Brother: “But we shouldn’t forget that the Carmelites were a brothel for priests. And then …”

A Jacobin glint appeared for just a moment in his eyes. The Brother gave a knowing smile. But his sister was already calling him toward the gate that led back to the garden of the rest home. The group gradually parted.

For us, symbol is continuously submerged and revealed by the "mnemonic wave."[626] With romanticism it begins to reemerge from the secret societies—the priests of the Enlightenment had confined it among those ceremonials of Cagliostro and Sarastro. Friedrich Creuzer speaks of the Kabirians. Goethe, the first great antiquarian of archetypes, lists them in the second part of *Faust*. Johann Jakob Bachofen writes about swamps and tombs. In academic publications—those considered by the most ingenuous men of letters as being remotest from tender existence—thousands and thousands of myths, rituals, fables charged with inexhaustible energy and accumulated in just a few years. Then the furious eruption of interpretation. Schools of thought clash: the Solars, the Lunars, the Astrals, the Diffusionists, the Evolutionists, the Tellurics. They are tribes that proliferate, find their leaders, their sorcerers, their victims. They dream of tortuous migration paths, the rebirth of Blood and Earth, descents from astral bodies, totemic lore, mythological keys. They are struck by trepidation and scruples. A great expert on phantoms understands, with the shrewdness of a Swiss farmer, that he can forgo everything but must speak in the name of science. And yet there is nothing scientific in what he does. Jung writes gnostic apocrypha in private, and would analyze them in public as psychotic documents. He analyzes psychotic documents in public, tracing them back to the vast academic library—still more or less unknown to anyone lower than an assistant professor or *Privatgelehrte*—in which the myths, rituals, fables had been amassed. He finds connections, and establishes (or seeks to establish) parallels and points of correspondence. He records everything in the name of science. He has found the password that enables him to survive—on every few pages he has to say that the whole forest of the past is a "psychological reality." And what is God, what are all gods if not a "psychological reality"? With this rudimentary trick, Jung has smuggled hundreds of pages of myths, hundreds of images, from academic libraries into the minds of his patients, his readers. But it was not just a convenient ploy. In its exoteric guise it was the password sought by

the world. In its esoteric guise it said something that once again distanced the symbol from the word: symbol as a "psychological reality" became linked to a *state of consciousness*. And states of consciousness could no longer be traced back, reduced to as many meanings. A state of consciousness can be related to language, but it cannot be replaced by language. Among others, even by this dubious path the symbol was brought back to life.

"… industry penetrates the dream and shapes it to its image, and meanwhile it becomes as fantastic as the dream itself."[627] Sainte-Beuve wrote these words in 1839, commenting on the new phenomenon of "industrial literature." These are the years when images are turned into a new article of production: advertising. Advertising, the nineteenth-century novel, and the visions of the inventors of patents all grow together, obeying the same impulse. As for novels, they are born from the convergence between "fiction for maidservants" and the "respectable novel" (the latter aiming to raise itself to the "honor of the three-cent novels" espoused by Stendhal: when there are many avid readers, "the director of the *cabinet littéraire* cuts each volume of the novel in half and loans it out at three cents a day").[628] In the same way that the inherent productiveness of fertile land had once nourished the social body, so now the reshuffling of images left to themselves guarantees an invisible perpetual motion, a background hum in the city. But the change to which images are subjected goes alongside the no less radical change to which industry is subjected: its experimental context now extends to the whole psyche, even before the psyche itself is mentioned. Through osmosis with the new material, industry is equated with the "dream." The sharp illustrations in the *Encyclopédie* are no longer enough: behind every craft workshop there is now a camera obscura, ready to shroud the whole of society in a phantasmagoria that knows no crisis of overproduction.

“The Organization Wouldn’t Like That”

These words are the most recent and common form of death sentence. They are words of perfect ideological neutrality. All “organizations”—whether in the Hollywood film noir, the Lubyanka, or the old-style Mediterranean mafia—are agreed on this blunt formulation.

Organization: the dread word that we encounter everywhere, at the bottom rung of the ladder as well as the top, is now a metaphysical word. Indeed, it is the word into which the whole of metaphysics seems to have migrated, like a family of aristocrats reduced to living in a three-room suburban apartment. And yet from their bleak point of observation, they seem to wield a power that has never been so extensive.

Societies have organized themselves for centuries, but—one might say—without being conscious of it. They used to speak, if at all, about something else—about order. And now a chasm has opened between order and organization. Organization is established when no trace of order can any longer be found—or when it exists as a will-o’-the-wisp. Organization is always based on itself, on nothing, on pure functional operation. Order is always based on another order, of which it is the image, the visible twin.

> At the origin of organization: the conspiracy.
> At the origin of the conspiracy: the secret society.
> At the origin of the secret society: initiation.
> At the origin of the initiation: origin.

The Italian Quattrocento, with its hemmed-in states, in perennial conflict, and therefore obliged to look for some other equilibrium, prefigures European history of later centuries, where Italy would no longer have a role, except as an instrument. Machiavelli is so much ahead of other Europeans for the very reason that he was born in the midst of that laboratory that was trying out a new notion of equilibrium. With the Reformation, and thus with the rejection of the hierarchical principle (Church and Empire), equilibrium—the equivalent of *pax* in a context of pure intrigue and alliance of powers—emerges as the only relevant residual criterion. Political theory in the seventeenth century would be devoted above all to absorbing so much brutal novelty behind such a noble euphemism: the equilibrium that might almost be presented as a

secularization of *harmonia mundi.* Urged on by this secular fury, let us turn instead to the gentle Archbishop Fénelon for a calm and pitiless formulation of the reasons on which the need for equilibrium is based: "Neighboring states are obliged not just to deal with each other according to the rules of justice and good faith; but likewise, for their particular safety as well as the common interest, they must constitute a sort of society and general republic.

"It must be recognized that in the long term the largest power always prevails and overturns the others, unless the others join together to counterbalance it.[629] People cannot hope that a superior power will keep within the bounds of an exact moderation and that it will desire, from a position of strength, only that which can be obtained from a position of weakness. Even if a prince were sufficiently perfect as to make such a wondrous use of his prosperity, such wonder would cease with his own reign. The natural ambition of sovereigns, the flattery of councilors, and the bias of whole nations make it impossible to believe that a nation capable of subjugating others will refrain from doing so for whole centuries. A kingdom with such an extraordinary display of justice would be a pearl of history and a miracle that we could never see again." This is the sinuous European gloss on the words of Thucydides: "We believe by tradition in the case of the gods, and we see by experience in the case of men, that always through a necessity of nature, every being exercises all the power at his disposal."[630]

Civil war, "the worst kind of war," marks the beginning and the end of the modern age.[631] A ghostly, derisive epiphany of the god Terminus, it suddenly points to the limit of what had been declared as a negation of the limit. The modern age is great when it subjects a supposed truth to close scrutiny and consequently rejects it. The modern age is murderous, with an unprecedented wealth of resources, when it claims to have discovered a truth. Carl Schmitt demonstrated once and for all that, to avoid the fury of religious wars, the appropriate answer was to reject the *justum bellum*. As a result, the delicate passage from the *justa causa belli* to the *justus hostis* has given rise to "the amazing fact that for two hundred years there has been no war of annihilation on European soil."[632] During this brief period, *jus publicum Europaeum* was combined with the introduction of the Modern State: the *machina machinarum*, the "first modern machine as well as a solid precondition for all other technical machinery."[633] The "*guerre en*

forme"—a cruel formal game of war that was safeguarded, however, by the strictness of its rules—brought a new unity to a certain space (a particular part of Europe) that became synonymous with civilization itself. Then the game disintegrated from within. In August 1914, a war began that seemed like so many other dynastic quarrels—and instead it turned immediately into the first technical war, whose structure denies all possibility of *guerre en forme*. So, too, the revolutionary war also makes its appearance, the final variant of the war of religion, the ultimate of all civil wars. The modern, most effective, most destructive, form of truth is tautological: that which is revolutionary is right because it is revolutionary; with it the question of *justa causa belli* is revived and finds a brisk response. One of the many ironies, one of the countless misconceptions resulting from the world being placed under the protective cloak of the West, is that when Iran raises the Islamic call to holy war it will already be a parody of the revolutionary war—and the Western intelligentsia will have no difficulty in recognizing it as its own. At least, at the beginning … The full and radiant truth of faith is subjected to the procedural and tautological truth of the West in its extreme form, and this is happening at the very moment in which the rejection of the West is being declared. At least, at the beginning …

Just as Walter Benjamin viewed the baroque drama from the window of the expressionist morgue, so Carl Schmitt viewed the religious wars through Walther Rathenau's bloodstained fur coat, through the exploits of Ernst von Salomon's outlaws, and through the wagonloads of banknotes during the Weimar inflation. But in doing so he noticed a pattern that had always previously been ignored: the ephemeral constellation of *jus publicum Europaeum*, preceded and followed by a massacre, which at first had been called war of religion and today has many names—above all because there is no longer any clear way of distinguishing *guerre en forme* from all-out war, or all-out war from civil war, or civil war from revolutionary war, or revolutionary war from "global civil war," which encapsulates and preserves all previous categories.[634] Korea and Vietnam: early examples of distant and localized civil wars that involve the two great powers, with a military apparatus equal or superior to that deployed in the world wars. The Arab-Israeli war: a civil war that is also a war of race and religion, and offers a permanent theater of negotiation for the powers. Terrorists who hijack or blow up aircraft thousands of miles away from their enemy: an act of contempt that recalls the eradication of *nómos* from

every land and the establishment of an order that has no foundations and therefore has no limits, but means that the theater of war, at whatever moment and in whatever place, becomes the killing of some *hostis injustus*, preselected or picked out at random.

An acrobatic period in Talleyrand's political career was the period of provisional government that he led in 1814. The whole of Europe then seemed suspended from one point—his bedroom on the mezzanine of his palace in rue Saint-Florentin. Talleyrand, by that time, was already the flotsam of three different tides: as bishop of the ancien régime, as sacrilegious drafter of revolutionary texts, and as Napoleon's minister. But no one dared say it—and Tsar Alexander I slept soundly just a few meters above him. Baron de Vitrolles, who observed Talleyrand with blunt curiosity, though with devotion, since he still felt in him the presence of "mysteries impenetrable to the uninitiated," noted: "It is difficult to form a view about the provisional government; it was entirely contained in the bedroom of M. de Talleyrand, on the mezzanine of his palace; his official staff consisted of various clerks assembled under the direction of Dupont de Nemours, the latest and best economist, and Roux-Laborie was the assistant secretary general.[635, 636] M. de Talleyrand's bedroom was open to all who knew him, men and women, and the conversations of all these people who came and went were the real deliberations on the affairs of state. Their main work was writing a few more or less witty articles for the newspapers, and this was called opinion-making. If, moreover, Prince Talleyrand was attracted by one idea among all those that passed through the head of those who came and went, he'd turn it into a decree, and the members of the government signed it on trust when they arrived, one by one, to visit their president." The whole unwieldy liturgy of power is lost here in open chatter among those who come and go. And yet the sovereignty survives, like an undamaged crystal, even if it now lies hidden beneath the Prince's many cushions. It will be a long time before Europe acknowledges it in such a casual form, and so close to its primordial state, aura and miasma. At the Congress of Vienna, a few months later, sovereignty already seemed worn down by a certain lack of inner substance. The monarchs of the Congress of Vienna and the parliamentarians of the Weimar Republic are tied by a morganatic bond. And thousands of torches would soon be lit at the

Nuremberg stadium to summon the faded essence of sovereignty from the darkness, before bathing it in blood to revive its ghostly pallor.

The *esprits forts* of the eighteenth century became the Monsieur Homais of the nineteenth century and the common sense of the twentieth.

Only two attempts have been made so far to go beyond nihilism: the years of Hitler, the reunion of blood and earth, defeat of the Hebrew acids of the intellect; and the years of Stalin, launch of the "realm of freedom," engineering of the soul.

One day the United States realized that it was an empire. But it didn't know what an empire was. It believed itself to be the biggest of all corporations.

If the profane—i.e., the profaner—devours what is sacred, then sacred and profane will merge in an entirely new way that makes it impossible, from then on, to separate them.

At one time, only the incommensurable had value. Now value alone is measurable, whereas nature, which has no value, is once again incommensurable.

Democracy: to extend to everyone the privilege of access to things that no longer exist.

The inevitable political choice that is offered today: to be governed by money or by informers? Oh, how much more amiable and lax is money …

The founding notion of all liberalism has an air of great moderation, and is summed up in a few lines jotted down by Victor Hugo in 1830, an auspicious year for moderate liberalism: "The republic, in my view, is when society is sovereign over society; protected by the national guard; judged by juries; administered by communes; governed by an electoral college."[637] What could be more obvious, convincing, straightforward? Hence the surprise, the helpless consternation when, in the next century, society finally became "sovereign over society" and immediately discovered that it wasn't a democracy or a republic, as Hugo had hoped, but an experimental theocracy, whose first priestly engineers were called Lenin and Hitler. Many

others followed, more inclined to corporate anonymity. All this seems to come from an untested mental mechanism where the word *sovereignty* carries behind it the whole panoply of gods. And, if the gods can no longer be named, it would carry behind it only the Inquisition in the name of God, which is now the name of sovereignty itself. A disillusioned sovereignty *cannot* exist, in the same way that arithmetic *cannot* not contain undecidable propositions. The whole political future depends on such a theory of sovereignty, which is still a long way from appearing evident, convincing, and well defined.

The Moscow Doorkeeper

Stretching his hands toward the heat of the samovar as he gazed from the window of the doorkeeper's room at the pallid complexion, with two red blotches on the cheeks (a true "Kremlin complexion," he used to say), of the assistant director (Anatoli Lozovski, who set foot in the institute no more than two or three times a year, bringing general trepidation), Andrei thought back to the times when those who followed the coffins had faces empty of all sentiment, ready to die in the daily routine of the revolution. Since then, words had settled into a sludge, clammy at first, now hardened and covered by a thin (almost invisible) layer of dust. Leaving the cramped and musty rooms of the city was, for a moment, like being thrust toward certain streets in Asia, but soon, even there, you would come across the ghosts of those twenty-five-foot-thick walls of the chilly, and distant, monasteries that received the souls of prisoners (among them was his son, fifteen years old) before burying them, like the carcasses of domestic animals in a farmyard. Sitting in his doorkeeper's room, dulled by the absence of alcohol, given the hour of the morning, before the offices filled up, Andrei gazed at the portion of yellowish gray wall beyond the window and felt the languor of forgotten space, overgrown by vegetation. Like all of us, he was attracted by far-off places, almost as if every remote and invisible thing suffered from his absence and was calling him. But he had

learned to distrust those chasms that opened every so often within him as naturally as a closing door. Alcohol, contrary to what happens in imperialist countries, helped him above all to control his feelings, to fill up the gaps, to establish a continual and oppressive flow that enabled him to carry out his doorman's duties unnoticed and, above all, to get through the nights, which drew him back toward the steppes and those vast and tender places where, still twenty years before, he had lent his services as an Improver. But the hardest time was first thing in the morning, when he risked being struck down by sobriety. And sobriety was bound up with hatred, which wasn't natural for him, but he was forced to absorb it from the walls around him. Hatred disturbed him, however hard he tried to anchor it to the depths of the sea. Frequently he found solace in the thought that, living there, in the doorkeeper's room of the Gorky Literature Institute (in September 1929 Gorky had written to him from Moscow: "Despite your great sensitivity in portraying characters, you nevertheless color them ironically, so that they appear to readers not so much as revolutionaries but as half-sick in the mind"), was in the end the closest approximation he had been allowed, in the city, to a life he had always respected: the pensive existence of the railway crossing keeper. Railway embankments had always seemed calm and intelligent in their isolation. There, of course, in the doorkeeper's room, he had no chance to see trains—driven, most probably, by his father, Railway Mechanic Platon Platonov, who had been the first person to explain that the Resurrection of Bodies would take place in the graveyard for motor cars. Repairing locomotives: a heavenly task. They would never have allowed him to do such a job, not just because of his tuberculosis and the alcohol, but because it would have been wrong to put Soviet transport, which is "the way forward for the locomotive of history" (he recalled a small poster glued to a pole in Central Asia), in the hands of a *podonok* ("scum"—that's what Stalin himself had written in the margin of one of Andrei's stories in 1931).

"Talking to yourself is an art, talking to others is a distraction," thought Andrei, as he wandered into the broom and rag cupboard. His expressionless silence made his scrawny body look more and more like that minuscule spectator who lives in every man, who plays no part in their action or in their suffering, who keeps a continual sangfroid, who is always the same. His task is to see and to witness, but he has no voting rights in human life, and knows of no reason for his solitary existence. "I, too, can

see," thought Andrei, "but I could never say I see." That nook of consciousness is illuminated day and night, like the doorkeeper's room in a grand apartment block. The doorkeeper is always vigilant, knows everyone in the building, but not one of them would ask his advice on personal matters. They come and go, the doorkeeper-spectator follows them with his eyes. The occupant, going out, leaves his wife there and is never anxious about the doorkeeper, who at times looks sad in his impotent knowingness, but is always courteous and discreet. He is the eunuch of the human soul. He lives elsewhere. If there's a blaze, he telephones for the fire engine and watches what happens from outside. "Who would ever say that I'd been an engineer before becoming this creature, that I had taken part in great land reclamation, and wanted to make the waters rise up from the Yellow Springs to establish socialism in the steppe?"

(… listening to a story that is a person, a time changed into space, a space that expands and coils in time, resting on a false present, a shining hollow, turned toward an echoing past; not knowing where our feet will give way: but appearing all around are the noble remnants of an architecture, which yet is no more solid than a film skimming over other surfaces, whose sheen no one will tarnish; crossing it, we find ourselves on the land of now, rich in short-lived memories that are superimposed on one another, though now they are like visitors, aliens to this or any other soil.)

The misfortunes of Homo naturalis. He emits an odor, merely from living, has a brusque and awkward manner. Caught by sudden drowsiness, he walks, listens, always captive to curiosity. He cautiously sniffs every corner before making his temporary home there. Indecent toward kitchen maids, myopic toward distant fate, prone to sentiment beneath his rough and fragile exterior, he remembers infant solitude.

Drifting is a necessity for him, in his thoughts as in his pleasures, remaining distrustful of their origin. Passing over, never stopping on one point and disturbing the ground, for it will clutch at his feet. Casual and aimless, he'd like to be seen as grateful, or at least cheerful: but he creates surprise with certain coarse words that leave a trace of vitriol, accompanied by a demeaning laugh, covered by a false courtesy. He enjoys scratching the

rancid, uncleanable crust at the base of existence. As though bound up inside a barrel, his sight closed on all sides, he writhes about, shaken by the irrepressible laughter of the *Homo deiectus*, and with small nervous scissors he cuts every tie. It is a throttling fit of laughter, of the kind Molière had onstage before he suffocated.

Montaigne's Wake

Mademoiselle de Gournay was expected to weep, for reasons of form. All the others talked away, a little more quietly than usual, recapitulating and digressing: oh, the Roman matrons, the murderous doctors, the post horses, the positions of the thumbs, the futility of the human condition, the cannibals, the back room of solitude … And those present behaved as though Montaigne were absent—nor had they bothered to pay superstitious homage to his face, nobly laid out on a collar of Flemish lace, his book beside him, in the casket of fragrant cherry wood—until suddenly he began to speak, demanding that they answer him, as conversational custom requires in honest society.

"And now—doesn't everything become immense?" said Sainte-Beuve at last, revealing in his gaze a ray of fanaticism that was indeed alien to him and alarmed some of the ladies gathered around. "This conversation that we are now conducting between moments of silence will never stop. The speaking presence of this dead man before us who we were about to bury with honor indicates that we will be long obliged to consider and heed our every mood-swing. And the perpetual chatter of detail dismays me."

"You, of all people," came the voice behind him of the delirious man from the *Soirées* of St. Petersburg. "You, my dear friend, who grieved so much in this vale of tears, who celebrated Good Friday with a double dinner Chez Magny, who have listened magnanimously to all that was singular and tangible, linked to the moment and to discretion … You of all people are now the first to feel a damned veil being laid over these tiny pleasures, over these wandering distractions of the intellect, much sooner and earlier than

over the vast storms of passion." Sainte-Beuve turned and answered: "Nothing is innocent, I well know—and least of all that feeling and enjoyment of nuance, which has always moved us, within which we have always moved … But deep down, even when you were with the cavalier and the senator on your terrace overlooking the Neva, your words were a continuation of our whisperings, as in a *cabinet de lecture*—and only the surroundings changed, which you wanted dark and barbaric, in anticipation of a thunderbolt from heaven … Whereas we, out of delicacy, out of uncertainty, had ruled that out from the start. And I venture to suggest, now, that the thunderbolt and the whispering will long be intertwined … Nothing clean-cut awaits us." As he replied, Sainte-Beuve slowly modulated his voice to that tone more familiar to his female company, and his expression of a soft, old cat emerged once more. Only a flush around the ears betrayed him. But conversation soon resumed in various parts of the room, and became muffled.

Much later, a thin, stern figure stood up, shabbily dressed. As if by way of conclusion, he said: "Confessions without regret, addressed to no one, for amusement, pleasure, boredom: ever since you began to leave Montaigne's tower, adorned with its epigraphs, ever since you went out into the world, to its coffeehouses, salons, garrets, and pantries, vegetation has covered every straight path: *ibidem* a dense, dark, venomous forest has grown—a forest fatal to all dreamers who have been assuaged by its vast shadow. A woodland of death, similar to that lugubrious surrounding of myrtle and cypress described by Virgil (*Secreti celant calles …*), grim abode of suicides, where in silence, many of those dear to us succumbed, gazing scornfully, like Dido, at prudent Aeneas, who did not mention the Ego, but had wrapped it into a safe bundle (*atque inimica refugit in nemus umbriferum*). What could have called you to that obscurity, apart from the attraction of a detail, of an obstinate, unspeakable singularity, around which you enjoyed wandering, into which you went, stubborn guardians, like marmots among their rough stones? Whoever was led to that life was devoted from the very beginning to the discontinuous, hostile to all *aequalitas*, observer (worshipper?) of sudden forces, incapable of a long breath that envelops every part. Breaths, ribbons, small specks, spores, cracks, tremulous sounds, exasperated nostalgia; little by little you have transformed yourselves into the cluttered bottom of a drawer …"

Ja'far al-Sadiq (who died in 148 A.H./765 C.E.), said: "Our cause is a secret concealed in a secret, the secret of something that remains concealed, a secret that only another secret can teach: it is a secret about a secret that is fulfilled by a secret."

O***: We were in the glass dome of the station. Petersburg. I still have the addresses. There I'll find the voices of the dead. Dank air of moldering parkland, odor of abandoned hothouses and roses rampant in the orangeries. And advancing toward it, the oppressive fumes of the buffet, acrid cigar smoke, the burnt brake gaskets of the wagons and the scent of the crowd. Thought: go and scatter it, tear it to pieces, so that it will be reminded of its furtive and lethal existence. O Literature, how many unfortunate functions were attributed to you, as to a fickle woman, eager for new clothes: couldn't you, every now and then, give hospitality to that being that no longer reads philosophical texts and is still silent in algorithms? Then perhaps it might once again be said: "I threw my life at all the winds of heaven, but I kept my thought. It is little—it is all, it is nothing—it is life itself."

During his time as a student at Königsberg he was convicted twice of theft. Then he was "manservant" and secretary, then Duchess Anna's lover, then autocrat as soon as Anna became empress. He treated Russians like plantation slaves. His name was Ernst Johann von Bühren, a minor Baltic nobleman, but pretended his name was Biron and was descended from the illustrious French family. After sending so many people for deportation, he himself was deported with his family, his siblings and various friends, accused of "inveterate *lèse-majesté*." He reemerged from Siberia when he was summoned by the mad tsar Peter III, together with the beautiful Lopuchina, whose tongue had been ripped out, and many others, including his mortal enemy, Marshall Münnich, who had had a prison built for Biron at Pelim, where he himself was later incarcerated for twenty years. The tsar wanted Biron and Münnich to drink a toast in front of him. He raised his glass, then moved away because something had been whispered to him. And so, Claude-Carloman de Rulhière records: "those two old rivals were left facing each other, each holding their glass, in silence, staring at the spot

where the emperor had disappeared; and shortly after, well pleased at the thought that he had forgotten them, both men looked back, fixed each other in the eye and, putting down their glasses still undrunk, they turned their backs on each other."[638] Petersburg was full of "people of interest, at least, for their long misfortunes," *revenants*, allowed to return through the benign whim of Peter III.[639] And immediately they were taken "into vast storehouses where, according to the custom of the country, all confiscated belongings were kept, sad records of falls from favor, where all the remnants of these celebrated downfalls are seen, arranged in order of time.[640] They would go searching in the dust for their precious furniture, their diamond-studded honors, gifts once used even by some rulers for obtaining credit; and too often, after searching in vain, they would recognize them worn by the favorites of the current reign." Rulhière saw Biron strolling around St. Petersburg: "On summer nights he was virtually the only person wandering the streets of this city he had ruled, and where everyone he met had reason for some explanation over the blood of a lost brother or friend."[641]

O***: Rather than thoughts, they are fragments of thoughts. Like memories, nagging away since they are never grasped: they approach and are lost, crests of the mnemonic wave. They do not tolerate an abundance of connectives, they look for the gap, a void in which to breathe between one space and the next, as happens in their lives as memories. Whether they are memories of others (which others?), or personal, or anonymous, beyond a certain point all becomes blurred—and no longer distinguishable. They now coexist amid the same dust—they talk to one another like family portraits on a long, dimly lit corridor.

Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, this "old, to a certain extent rebellious, half-apocryphal province of my thoughts," drew its "tone," as he explained in a letter to Gershom Scholem, from his piece on postage stamps in *One-Way Street.*[642, 643] There he refers to those collectors "who are only interested in postage stamps with postmarks" and are perhaps "the only people who have penetrated the mystery," since the postmark is "the occult part of the postage stamp," its "nocturnal side."[644] Benjamin regarded history, as presented by orthodox historians, as a postage stamp without a postmark: bland in its pristine condition. The postmark, on the other hand,

which “covers faces with bloody weals” and opens “chasms through entire continents,” is the invisible hand of time, which takes the liberty of placing an indelible black mark over a landscape of tropical palms.[645] And this very weal heightens the sensuality of the postage stamp and of history, which captivates us in its “white lace-trimmed tulle dress: the scalloped edge.”[646]

According to Benjamin, the transition from dream to wakefulness was marked by the comb, which opens a path into the tangle of hair that is ruffled during the night. “Combing: the comb in the morning is the first thing that drives dreams from the hair.[647] Combing is a mother’s job,” he told Fränkel, who was assisting him in a mescaline experiment. The resistance offered to the comb is from hair that is “*indéfrisable*,” such as hairdressers display in their windows in the arcades.[648] It is important to approach with care, for “with care, not without it, we extricate ourselves from the realm of dream.” And thus the comb to which Benjamin refers will be the attribute of the Sirens, the Pecten Veneris (Venus’s comb), and *kteís* (which means both “comb” and “vulva”); the comb that appeared in the mysteries of Themis. Due to its feminine quality, a comb disentangles and harbors dreams. The device used by Benjamin is that of a Ulysses who not only listens to the Sirens but uses their ceremonial object as a weapon, taking it as a guide to emerge from the dream, though without rejecting it, in a pact of complicity. Literature is that slow, cautious, careful progress of the comb: “in the comb there is a consolation, rendering what has happened as if it hadn’t happened.”[649]

Like a true gnostic, accustomed to persecution and disguise, Benjamin sought to hide beneath the cloak of the dialectic materialist and let himself be pursued for this, so that he could survive, unharmed, as a gnostic. But every police instinct is trained first of all to recognize the *foetor gnosticus*, there’s always a zealot ready to pick him out, in his office at the Soviet Encyclopedia. Benjamin suffered continual harassment in Moscow. Stretched out on his bed, in a dingy bedroom, he munches marzipan and reads Proust, protected from his unassailable, grieving childhood.

In 1879, Marianne North donated 832 oil paintings of flowers and plants she had come across in Brazil, New Zealand, Borneo, Chile, India, California, Australia, Singapore, Jamaica, Tenerife, and elsewhere to the

Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. They were hung at a minimal distance to each other, as in a picture by Teniers, or a giant stamp album. Large and intricate friezes framed the windows of the high gallery that ran around the two rooms (in days of poor weather a scant light shone on the scenes of tropical splendor); the walls were paneled with 246 types of wood that she had collected during her travels. Some areas were inlaid with flower designs. Four of the plants she had painted would now contain her name: *Northea seychellana*, *Nepenthes northiana*, *Kniphofia northiae*, *Crinum northianum*. Only one of her wishes remained unmet: in those rooms, which were like an island of mirrors in the middle of the park, she had asked that tea be served. But the botanical authorities would not agree. "No refreshments in Kew Gardens …" Marianne North called the two volumes of her memoirs *Recollections of a Happy Life.*

Talleyrand's art belongs to metamorphosis, hence to monstrosity. Nineteenth-century sentimental moralism failed to understand it: political corruption and volte-faces were not enough to reach monstrosity. But one of the most feminine eyes to set its gaze on Talleyrand, that of Aimée de Coigny, could recognize the fearful and difficult moments when he changed his skin: "Like the fairies we used to talk about as children, which for a certain period of time were forced to shed the glittering forms that covered them in order to assume other repellent forms, Monsieur de Talleyrand is subject to sudden transformations that are short-lasting, but frightening.[650] Then the sight of respectable people annoys him and he becomes horrible toward them. I used to fear, I don't know why, finding him in this state that I call *shedding his coat* and was pleasantly surprised to see him amiable and sincere."

Léon Daudet had a dream—this was the time when Edmond de Goncourt was still calling him "grand gamin," though he was already flaunting the black velvet mortarboard worn by chic students. He dreamed that Professor Charcot brought him some of Pascal's thoughts, and at the same time pointed out in a brain he had with him—and it was Pascal's brain—"the brain cells where those thoughts had dwelt, which were absolutely empty, and similar to the cells of a dissected beehive."[651]

The Wolf-Man Recalls

I was born where the earth of Odessa
is blacker.
French governess, Austrian tutor.
I traveled throughout Europe with my doctor
and an assistant for card-playing.
Years later I found myself off limits
with my easel in no-man's-land.
Allied command, Russian command.
All wanted to arrest me.

Want to see Europe? Then go to Spa: "There's no better vantage point than those places where the waters flow."[652] The Prince of Ligne had a saber wound and wanted to take a look, always curious, footloose, with little interest in his own affairs, impulsive, since he knew his chances were good. What he saw was the changing allegory of Europe, depicted by a continental Hogarth, the improbable and precarious world that history had raised and abandoned to the flow: "I arrive in a large hall where I see amputees with their arms on display, cripples with their legs on display; ridiculous names, titles, and faces; amphibian animals of the Church and of society who leap and run behind a column of Englishmen; hypochondriac lords who stroll around sadly; flirtatious girls from Paris who arrive with great giggles of laughter, trying to appear friendly and casual, and hoping this is the way to do it; young men from all countries, who pretend to be Englishmen and imagine they are, talking through clenched teeth, dressed in riding outfits, their hair curled up, black and greasy, and Jewish-looking side-whiskers as far up as their filthy ears; French bishops with their nieces; an obstetrician with the Order of Saint Michael; a dentist with the Order of the Golden Spur; dance and song masters dressed as Russian majors, Italians with the rank of colonel in the Polish army, carrying behind them young bears from that country; Dutchmen scanning the gazettes for the currency rates; thirty self-proclaimed knights of Malta; sashes of every

color, left and right, and in their buttonholes; badges of every shape and size, arrayed on both sides; fifty knights of Saint Louis; elderly duchesses returning from their walk, with thick walking sticks *à la Vendôme* and three inches of powder and rouge; several marquises returning from playing cards in the country; ghastly and suspicious faces, in the middle of a mountain of ducats, they were devouring everything that was put down tremulously on the green baize; one or two electors in hunting dress, with gold braid and knife; a few princes incognito, who would have produced no greater effect under their true names; several old generals and officers on leave for wounds they'd never received; several Russian princesses with their doctors; and Palatine or Castilian princesses with their almoners; a few Americans; some local burgomasters; fugitives from all the prisons of Europe; charlatans of every kind; opportunists of every sort; abbés from every country; several poor priests, tutors to young boys of Liège; several English archbishops with their wives; twenty sick people who dance like mad things to restore their health; forty lovers, or presumably so, who sweat and fret; and sixty women who dance the waltz, of varying degrees of beauty or innocence, skill and coquetry, modesty and voluptuousness."[653]

CHEVALIER DE B***: It is extraordinary to observe, first of all, how easily history disappears. The dead are wiped away, their monuments have become traffic islands, their books are grassy country tombs. Everyone who lives is the barbarian of what has just lived. If we consider the past, we encounter no more than an obstinate reverberation of images, of rasping voices. And in the middle, vast opaque soundless areas. The invisible presences are grateful if we sense this awesome distance, this mighty silence. They feel no greater disdain than for those who treat the past with cordial familiarity.

"What can thought do now?" asked the Master. "Hide itself," he replied, and disappeared.

Conversation is an art that its great masters, its great mistresses, considered lost even as they were speaking. Madame de Staël's lament over a certain tone that could no longer be found comes several decades after that of Madame du Deffand. It would therefore be pointless searching for a time when that fleeting essence had not already in some way vanished. But

it is clear what took it away forever. It was *husbands*—as Stendhal declared, with touching emphasis. If we had to find one feature that typified the immeasurable difference in behavior between the age of Louis XVI and that of Louis XVIII, it would be this: that before the guillotine women appeared alone in society, whereas just a few years later—and this began with Napoleon, who "in 1804 brought *pruderie* into fashion"—it wasn't possible to see a young woman in a salon without being "certain of finding her husband playing *écarté* in some corner.[654, 655] This eternal and constant presence of the husband, while most laudable and moral, struck the death blow to the art of conversation … The husband stifles that spirited abandonment that produces malice, innuendo, *witticisms*, which, though innocent in itself, cannot be expressed in the presence of *authority established by law*. In wit, in satire, in gaiety, in short in social comedy, there is invariably some spirit of *opposition*. Many people make fun of established authority: by nature, they are rebels. Not to mention how the eternal presence of the same person impedes creative inspiration. How can you tell a story or an anecdote if you're within earshot of a witness, who is there—and you well know it—listening to the twists that you'll be adding to give a certain effect or to liven up your account? How can you drop into a conversation, with that necessary air of improvisation, the spicy news you've picked up during the day if you're being watched by someone who was perhaps there with you? It's impossible. When the husband opens the door, the art of conversation must inevitably leave by the window." Talleyrand was always surrounded by women who disregarded their husbands in the Stendhalian sense, and often in every other sense. It all began at Reims, on the day of his great entrance into society: "The *sacre* of Louis XVI marks the beginning of my connections with various women remarkable for their various gifts, women whose friendships have never ceased for a single moment to cast their spell on my life.[656] I refer here to the Duchesse de Luynes, the Duchesse de Fitz-James, and the Vicomtesse de Laval." Some were his lovers, others disappeared over the years, others were added, but as though they had always been around him. At the beginning, they were insolent and adventurous; at the end, they were decrepit and frivolous. But they always watched over him like a bodyguard that enclosed the Prince in a magical circle of soft fabric.

François Fénelon soon realized how hard it was to be a Taoist at the Court of France. *Esprit* had now forsaken that uncontrollable power that *ubi vult spirat* and now became a blend of relentless study and rampant free thought. Whether it was etymology or gossip, everything had to be subjected to its furious scrutiny. It was the invisible observatory, but from which everything could supposedly be seen. A great psychologist, who scorned psychology, Fénelon immediately recognized what was the endless process to which new disciples of the "I, which is the god of secular people," submitted themselves: it was a machine that would roll them as far as Nietzsche and Freud, as far as those tireless genealogists lying in wait at the threshold of every beginning, every story, to reveal everything (but Nietzsche eventually saw that everything was veiled).[657] And, at that point, only a few scraps of the I would be left. No one who followed that path would ever find peace, for "the Lord exists not in agitation."[658] The whole of the Enlightenment is anticipated by Fénelon in a few lines. "He who seeks to reassure himself all the time that he is acting according to reason, and not through passion or mood, would be wasting time for action, he would spend his life dissecting his own heart and would never achieve what he is searching for: since he would never be sure that the mood or the passion, disguised beneath specious reasons, are not making him do what he would seem to be doing purely out of reason."[659]

Fénelon explained to his correspondents that it was less important to mortify and punish themselves (and, in particular, to give in to "scruples") than it was to carry out a more difficult task—to lose all respect for *esprit*.

Where there is *esprit* there is the I—and "the I, which has to be renounced, is not a nothingness or phantom in the air; it is our intellect which thinks, it is our will which does as it wishes out of self-love."[660] *Esprit* is split into two breaths and two rival lights: one immediately blows out the candle of the other. "Reasoners, scholars without faith, extinguish their inner spirit as the wind blows out the candle."[661] "I have always observed that your respect for the spirit is rooted in your heart and you do not let it go. Yet this is precisely what the spirit of grace most often extinguishes when allowed to act freely."[662] One single image dominated Fénelon's conduct: water, a feminine water, which has no form itself but takes every form, always transparent, with no flavor. As archbishop, he was the water that flowed through the crevices of Versailles. Saint-Simon, who could study physiognomies in the same way that Fénelon discerned spirits,

saw his face as a mobile and liquid surface: “This prelate was a tall, thin man, a fine figure, pale, with a large nose, and eyes from which fire and spirit flowed like a torrent, and of such a physiognomy that I have never seen the like, and which couldn’t be forgotten, even when seen only once. It gathered everything within it, and its contrasts did not clash. It had gravity and gallantry, seriousness and gaiety; in it one perceived the doctor, the bishop, the great lord; uppermost, as in his whole person, was refinement, spirit, grace, decorum and above all nobility.” It is no surprise that this exterminator of *esprit* had such an abundance of it, even if he was “a man who never wished to have more spirit than those to whom he spoke.”[663] This indeed was his art of dissimulation: enemy of “all the extremes, even in goodness,” since they “bring with them refined affectation,” he displayed so much *esprit* in order to appear more mediocre, more akin to the ordinary courtier, who was ever desperate for *esprit*.[664] His worldly perfection, before which Saint-Simon bowed, had become for Fénelon a vehicle that made it possible to transmit, intact and unrecognized, that nameless and formless “foundation” for everything, which intelligence and delicacy were constantly dissipating. “Nothing can match the courtesy, wisdom, pleasantness with which he received everyone.”[665] But this immaculate hospitality was the context for a work of vast destruction: “Be a true nothing in everything and everywhere; but nothing need be added to this nothing.[666] On nothing there is no hold. And nothing to lose. The true nothing never resists, because it doesn’t have an *I* that looks after it.” Saint-Simon observes that it is “incredible to what extent [Fénelon] became the idol of military men.”[667]

The *Lumpen*, evoked so stridently by Stirner, lurked in every crevice of society. They were the shadow of history, numberless downtrodden and silent existence, “the immense renegade of Yesterday,” glimpsed behind the weight of the “past that will not go away,” that snatches away scraps of the present “with its black claws” and “spews up its old night.”[668] But this was just the beginning. Stirner was not particularly familiar with nature, beyond Charlottenburg. When the *Lumpen* crept in, passing from underground to impregnate the soft earth, he could no longer follow them. He fell silent. Victor Hugo, the poet of matter, who had become so through the practice of spiritualism, took his place. The epos of paupers flowed from his “mouth of shadow.”[669] Tipping tables had given Hugo a metaphysical narrow-

mindedness, but one full of images that pervaded everything and jumbled his good intentions with the bad intentions of Maldoror, until it reached a point of coruscating neutrality. In the whirl of transformation every object, every plant, every dish turned out to be a place of expiation, every landscape a place of reclusion, a reliquary. Replying to Marquis Coriolis d'Espinouse, who was shocked to see that he had fallen "into total Jacobinism," Hugo mocked "that old rheumatism called royalty."[670, 671] But his was a dark, tormented humor, and presupposed some apparition: "The whole dread jail of outcasts rises up."[672] While strolling in Jersey, among rocks and heather, he would see this jail of outcasts as the cosmos itself. "Oui, ton fauve univers est le forçat de Dieu.[673] / Les constellations, sombres lettres de feu, / Sont les marques du bagne à l'épaule du monde—Yes, your wild universe is God's prisoner / The constellations, grim letters of fire, / They are the brand of prison at the shoulder of the world." The cosmos drained by crude mechanists came back to life, to bathe itself with souls. They inhabited every blade of grass, like a boundless jail of ghosts. "L'archipel ténébreux des bagnes s'illumine—The dark archipelago of prisons is lit."[674] Those beings cast out of communal life, *Lumpen*, *gueux*, paupers, welcomed the grandees and kings of the earth as guests in a vaster dwelling place. Caiaphas is a bramble, Pilate a reed, Alaric a "scarlet-throated" volcano. "Grains of sand are kings, blades of grass emperors," all fixed into a tangible form that groans—and could just as well be a chair or a window frame.[675] Hugo proclaims "the outcast universe."[676] Out of the poet's hundred and fifty thousand lines and more, Hofmannsthal, with his perfect ear, marked out certain words: *fauve*, *hagard*. *Fauve* is the universe as "God's prisoner." And, after a brief cataract of words, Hugo writes: "L'univers est hagard."[677] A word from falconry, *hagard* comes from *Hagerfalk*, the wild falcon that is too ferocious to be tamed. Time has led the word to new meanings: "bewildered," "afflicted by a sinister presence," like *Lumpen*, these wild falcons that circle the streets of the city. But those streets are now drawn across the celestial vault.

The *Liber Mundi* that the monk was contemplating had clear, luminous letters. Each creature was a copy transcribed from the great Koran: the cosmos. Every herb in the cloister found its place on a written page, for "nature has only one script" and all was easily ascribable to that script.[678] Every book opened on the lectern was in a way the same book, each letter

filled Saint Jerome's cell with a hum of correspondences, while the meek lion lay at his feet, guarding a rugged savanna of parchments. Reading absorbed every other occupation, even those of the liturgy: recognizable in the syllables of the hymns were extracts from a reading of the seasons, records of the celestial cycles. Sainte-Beuve was a young man from the provinces, often gloomy, who had abandoned his medical studies to embark on a literary career. From the outset he had listened to every voice, but couldn't fully understand the meaning of the verb *believe*. And yet he realized that dwelling within him, like a duplicitous alien, was a "parasitic religiosity."[679] Incapable of any faith, he observed in himself, with a naturalist's wonder, the vibrations of "Christian *sensibility*."[680] He, too, belonged to that species of men of whom he wrote: "A sober life, an overcast sky, a certain mortification of desire, a pensive and solitary manner, all this penetrates them, softens them, and inclines them imperceptibly toward belief."[681] But something that inclines toward belief is far removed from something that demands belief. In his case, in fact, it ruled it out. The elegiac Sainte-Beuve, who stared out at the bare courtyard behind his study, soon became the *rôdeur* who prowled the streets of the great city, racked by the urge for some feminine tenderness; the *railleur* who cunningly navigated the corridors of newspaper offices; the *causeur* who was well practiced in dropping a small dose of flattery or poison. And something in him said that this complex of vices formed the core of literary civilization, and would allow nothing to be worshipped but them. With the spontaneous cynicism of the inventor of forms, Sainte-Beuve long made use of his "Christian sensibility" to attune himself to Port-Royal. But it was a question of ear and certainly not of doctrine. He found that he admired Bayle for a certain "basic indifference," for his ability to move over whatever kind of terrain, provided that it was typographical.[682] "He's not afraid of *mésalliances*; he goes everywhere, through the streets, gathering information, talking to people; curiosity attracts him and he doesn't say no to the pleasures that offer themselves."[683] A curiosity all the more eager since it was based ultimately on indifference, a case of faith in an irrepressible faithlessness. Was he a skeptic? Or a mystic? Something in those descriptions, however, was relevant to Sainte-Beuve himself. In the end, in both cases, everything depended on one single experience: reading, that subtle mania that no longer sought to find, in the transparency of the page, even the characters of the *Liber Mundi* but expected a few futile

answers from futile and anonymous books: “Can you tell me, please, / In what corner and among what clutter / I might possibly find some trace / Of Monsieur Malherbe’s long stay / At Carpentras, or of Ménage’s expression / when he performed his role Chez Sévigné?[684] / Did Monsieur Conrart know Latin / Better than Jouy? Did he wear out fewer quill pens / Than Suard? Did Docteur Guy Patin have more than ten thousand volumes?” But one day Sainte-Beuve felt he was approaching something that seemed to be his own point of equilibrium. A vision that he didn’t welcome and to which he yielded through exhaustion. For him, as for the monks who compiled herbaria and for whom, after all, he had no interest, *everything was a book*. But liturgical devotion manifested itself in him as “basic indifference,” a willingness to read those countless and now grubby characters anywhere, without distinction, without purpose, regardless, with no hope of encountering at any point the beginning or the end of the book, which indeed no longer existed: “Perhaps as a feigned excuse for my indolence, perhaps because now I have a deeper perception of the principle that *everything in the end is the same*, I have reached the point of considering that, whatever I do or don’t do, whether I labor in my study on a specific work or fritter my energies on many articles or waste my time in company, letting my hours be taken up by the importunate, the needy, by appointments, in the street, by anyone and anything, nevertheless I never stop doing just one single thing, reading just one single book, an infinite, perpetual book of the world and of life, which no one reads to the end, of which the wisest people decipher many pages; I therefore read all the pages of it that are presented to me, at full tilt, backwards, what does it matter![685] I never stop. The richer the blend of colors, the more frequent the interruptions, the more I am drawn into this book where you always find yourself in the middle; but the advantage is to have read it by opening it in all sorts of places.”

What are the dead for us, if not—before all else—books? Of all forms of prehistoric religion, that which seems most remote and most difficult to understand today is the cult of the dead, their perpetual presence in every occurrence of life. But for ancient man, the most remote and most difficult aspect in our cult would have been the use of books. And yet both forms converge. Solidified into portable objects that accompany us, prey on us, haunt us, assuage us, the dead have established themselves on the written

page: their power has never diminished, though it has undergone a wondrous change.

Voices from the Palais-Royal

Restif de la Bretonne: "… this center of chaos of a great city."[686]

Richelieu chose the place thanks to his usual capacity to touch a body's center of gravity: that great quadrangle which, at that time, was called Palais-Cardinal, then Palais-Royal, then Palais-Marchand, then Palais-Égalité, then Jardin de la Révolution, before once again becoming Palais-Royal, the center of the center of the center of the vast body of *civilisation*, created in the midst of eighteen years of hatred and intrigue. Mighty figureheads and stone anchors jutted from the old façade as a reminder that the Cardinal presided over the seas and over commerce.

Young Louis XIV once almost drowned in the pool of the central fountain, at a time when Anna of Austria had taken Richelieu's place and Mazarin had only to cross the garden of the Palais-Cardinal from his residence at Hôtel Turbeuf to reach the queen's apartments. The future Sun King was not yet ten, and spent many long hours with the daughter of one of his mother's maidservants. He called her "Queen Marie" and they played at being king and queen in the palace kitchens.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a versatile writer, had described Paris in the year 2440, subtitling it: "a dream if ever there was one." But like all rational utopias, his city was a place of Tedium and Rectitude. At the theater, the only plays to survive were those full of wise words and characters of positive virtue, a perpetual Corneille in the style of Zdanov, with great distrust of Racine, since he, "having made his heroes effeminate, makes his audience effeminate."[687] The streets were constantly lit, and libraries purged of any harmful literature. The "dangerous ferment" of Jews, pushy and greedy due to "inadequate vigilance in earlier centuries," was at last

brought to an end. There had naturally been a need for "wisdom, constancy, and firmness in breaking down that ardent fanaticism," but now the Jews were finally reduced to "earning their living in absolute tranquillity," about which Mercier offers us no further details.[688] But Mercier's gaze rests not only on petty utopian detail. He also had the eye of an eager *flâneur*—and at the end of his *Tableau de Paris*, after twenty-two chapters on lapdogs and *roués*, on Bicêtre and obscenity in the churches, on women's fashion and Parliament, he introduces us to that matchless place, pure essence of the West, to which the whole city was mysteriously drawn, the Palais-Royal:

"A place unique on the globe.[689] Visit London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Vienna, and you will see nothing like it: a prisoner could live here without ever being bored, and would not think of freedom for many years. This is the very place where Plato wanted to consign a prisoner, to hold him without a jailer, and without force, with sweet and voluntary chains. People call it the *capital of Paris*. There is everything here; put a young man of twenty there with an income of fifty thousand *livres*, and he will want nothing more, he'll not know how to leave this phantasmagorical place; he'll become a Rinaldo in this palace of Armida; and while that hero's time and almost his glory was lost there, so too will our young man lose his, and perhaps also his fortune: from now on, he will be there only for pleasure; he will tire of everything else. This enchanted spot is a small luxurious city, enclosed within a great city; it is the temple of pleasure, from which magnificent vices have banished even the specter of shame: no hostelry in the world is more charmingly depraved; everyone laughs here, and innocence blushes."

"Whatever you could desire, you'll find it here; you'll even find courses in physics, poetry, chemistry, anatomy, languages, natural history, etc., etc., etc.[690] The women, here, have given up all the pedantic seriousness of the old Hôtel de Rambouillet, and they flirt with the sciences, which are now nothing other than a game for them, and entertain them as much as their miniature poodle and their parrot."

"Here you can see everything, hear everything, learn about everything; there is everything necessary to turn a young man into a budding scholar: but it is here also that the realm of licentiousness acts upon a headstrong youth who, wandering then around the various environments, develops a

style not known elsewhere: indecency without passion.[691] Here, licentiousness is eternal; its temple is open at any hour of the day and night, and at prices of every kind."

"All the fripperies of fashions that last a day are in the same shop as the most valuable astronomic gems that last for centuries."[692]

"The coffeehouses are packed with men who have one single occupation for the whole day: telling or listening to news, which becomes unrecognizable through the color each person gives it, according to their condition."[693]

"… the Palais-Royal is sapping the other districts of the city, which have the air of sad and deserted provinces."[694]

"… this maze of ribbons, gauze, tassels, flowers, garments, masks, boxes of rouge, packets of half-foot-long pins."[695]

There is one place where Paris, in all its dispersion and fragmentation, in its aroma of pleasure and money, grows and accumulates everything within the setting of a palace, within its limpid shell. This place is the Palais-Royal, which becomes Palais-Marchand when, thanks to the debts and greed of the Duc d'Orléans, workshops, erotic caverns, perfumeries and gaming rooms are opened beneath the porticoes. On the brink of the Revolution, those arcades become the magnet of Rumors, the astrolabe of courtesans, the embers of persecutions. From those windows—through which only the shouts of playing children can now be heard, and long before Colette and Cocteau gazed out of them—two rivals had once kept watch in the darkness, attendants to the most credulous and indifferent being, the Lord of the Place, the Duc d'Orléans, later Philippe-Égalité. These were Madame de Genlis, who "to avoid the scandal of flirtation had always readily succumbed," and Choderlos de Laclos, well-practiced in intrigue, theorist of "wicked gallantry" as "a useful prelude for the wicked politician."[696, 697]

One of the most perfect opening passages in literature conveys to us the irresistible attraction of the Palais-Royal: "It is my practice, no matter what the weather, to go for a stroll at around five in the evening to the Palais-

Royal.[698] I am the one who can always be seen alone, dreaming, on the banc d'Argenson. I amuse myself with politics, love, questions of taste and philosophy. I let my spirit run completely free. I give it free rein to follow the first wise or foolish idea that presents itself, in the same way that we see our dissolute young men in allée de Foy following the footsteps of some flighty courtesan with smiling face, keen eye, nose in the air, and then leaving her to follow another, tagging on to all of them and on to none. My thoughts are my whores." Here Diderot formulates a poetics of thought quite opposite to that advocated in the *Encyclopédie*—and which, above all, is far more radical in rejecting the past. Here the most obstinate of sins, the *delectatio morosa*, is not only vindicated but raised to the level of a technique. That which a long succession of witnesses had believed it was necessary to extirpate before thought could even be countenanced, becomes the primordial water of thought itself. Palais-Royal is the mnemotechnical setting for this thought. A nameless being, comfortably settled in the midst of the chaos, follows strands of words, roaming images, constructs minuscule paper edifices, watches ribbons, buckles, and shawls ruffled by the wind under the arches, catches frissons of excitement, immerses inner words into the external hum of voices, lets himself be carried away by lights and sudden imperious shadows, succumbs, has no idea where he's going—nor even whether that maelstrom will soon guide him back, without recollections, to the banc d'Argenson.

A place for gossip and "deep idleness," a universal storehouse promising limitless availability, a no-man's-land where the police never set foot (for such is the family prerogative of Orléans), the park of the Son of Heaven, *paradisus inversus*, "a great flesh market," heralding the industrial phantasmagoria that will entice Benjamin into the arcades, the Palais-Royal is the image of an unpurified, childish, crude *bonheur* that increasingly exasperates its own pleasure and seeks to draw it to destruction.[699, 700] It is here that the first liturgical act of the Revolution takes place, on July 12, 1789, when two wax busts of Necker and the Duc d'Orléans, taken from Curtius's already Hoffmannesque wax museum, were carried in procession. According to one witness: "The people, at the sight of those two species of phantoms, abandoned themselves to extravagant conjectures."[701] Those conjectures would be followed, two days later, by the taking of the Bastille. Events throughout the Revolution would be nurtured by the teeming ghosts of the Palais-Royal.

Les Galeries de Bois, Le Camp des Tartares, Le Cirque, names of places at the Palais-Royal now gone, large muslin shawls, almanacs describing women and their prices, thirty-one gaming houses. In 1790 the National Assembly received a "petition from the two thousand one hundred prostitutes of the Palais-Royal." Gold and silver earrings in the shape of guillotines were fashionable. La Chevalier, one of the "nymphs" most in demand, was daughter of the executioner at Dijon. Restif satisfied his mania for classification—already much like that of Fourier—by listing the "girls from the alley of sighs," the "*sunamites*," the "*converseuses*." Boutonderose, always dressed in linen; Dorine, the philosopher, air of refinement, generally dressed in pink-lined muslin; Élise, "a woman exuding Sensuality rather than Grace"; Pyramidale, pretty brunette; Sensitive; Amaranthe; Barberose.[702] The inhabitants of Le Camp des Tartares included a giant Prussian, Mademoiselle Lapierre, more than seven feet tall; the beautiful Zulina, naked, reclining odalisque, a full-size wax statue covered with artificial skin; the gigantic Paul Butterlbrodt, who weighed 475 pounds. The shops sold "Roman dresses à la Clio," "Greek blouses," "Thessalian coats" that opened by loosening a single knot. Hairstyles were introduced "*à la sacrifiée*," "*à la victime*." The "*femmes du monde*" now held court in the apartments of noble émigrés on the second floor of the galleries. Those ten or so grand courtesans, with small black servants and fashionable accoutrements, were "the real peril," far more than the "nymphs" who took their clients to attic rooms, rented by the minute, that were dotted around the vast maze of corridors, beyond the sumptuous salons where the ivory roulette wheel spun.[703] The brain was overwhelmed by the aroma of that warm scented flesh, by the smells from the open kitchens, hung with game, the meeting point, Baudelaire wrote, for "calamitous dogs," for "those who wander lone in the meandering ditches of the immense cities," for those "who sleep in a suburban ruin and arrive each day, at a fixed time, to claim a wrap of food at one of the kitchen doors of the Palais-Royal."[704]

With the intent gaze of the naturalist, Hippolyte Taine stoops to look at the Palais-Royal and recognizes there the peculiar vegetation of new times, the venomous flora of the down-and-outs who clog and corrode the elementary mechanisms of every class struggle: "Center of prostitution, gaming, idleness and pamphleteering, the Palais-Royal attracts all that

rootless population that drifts around a large city and which, having neither employment nor home, lives only for curiosity and pleasure, which haunts coffee shops, gambling houses—opportunists and down-and-outs, lost or redundant sons of literature, art and law, attorney's clerks, schoolboys, fools, *flâneurs*, foreigners and lodgers in *hôtels garnis*; it is said there are forty thousand of them in Paris."[705] Michelet denounced the Palais-Royal of the Orléans as "this house where everything is fake."[706] That arid and intoxicating fever could develop only in a place dedicated to a *karman* of sensual enjoyment, of cold exasperation and deception: powers that belong to the retinue of exchange. But when the liturgy of the Revolution begins, the roles are reversed: the down-and-outs of the Palais-Royal, these gossipmongers, become the voice of the people, they fill the public galleries of the assemblies and intimidate the provincial representatives. The Council of State would eventually arrive—Napoleon installs it at the Orléans palace to exert administrative control over that center of ghosts. There, one evening in 1787, the young Bonaparte, a military officer, had approached a pallid "nymph," despite being "affected more than anybody else by the loathsomeness of their condition." "You'll catch cold, how do you manage to wander about here outside?" he said. "Oh, sir, it's hope that keeps me going, I have to get through the evening." There were still fire attacks, restorations, and barricades: but no compromise was allowed between the Modern State and the Palais-Royal.[707] When Bonaparte came to power, the first rumor to emerge from the Palais-Royal was that the general was preparing to deport the girls from that place to Egypt. "But that's outrageous! Hell, deportations aren't done like that!" said Bonaparte with feigned indignation, as soon as he was told about the rumor. And he began stroking the head of Rustan, his favorite mamluk. Today its silence is pervaded by the echo of occasional footsteps. A public garden, with solitary benches, children. Returning home, Colette, who was sensitive to the cold, felt between the colonnade and the wall "a perennial, zigzag movement of air that comes from the square of the Palais-Royal and splits into two currents: one fills rue de Montpensier, the other penetrates into the galerie de Chartres.[708] In summer, this is where the dust swirls; in fall, a maelstrom of early-falling leaves dances in the same spot."

There is laughter at the Palais-Royal, for "comedy is one of the clearest satanic signs in man," unquestionable evidence of original sin.[709] The mark

of the Orléans family, a compulsive scorn for everything, is impressed even on the perfect symmetry of their palace. But its garden is also the retreat for the Old Man of the Mountain, at the point where civilization is most "turbulent, excessive, mephitic."[710] As he walks the streets of Paris, Baudelaire imagines Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Virginie, for whom Napoleon still felt moved during his last days on Saint Helena—while he was emperor, he had told Bernardin: "You should give us a *Paul et Virginie* every six months." She who "is the perfect symbol of absolute purity and innocence" seemed, thought Baudelaire, "still wholly imbued with sea mist and gilded by the tropical sun, with eyes full of great primitive images of the waves, of the mountains, and of the forests."[711] She, too, heads on toward the Palais-Royal. And there, "by chance, innocently," Virginie sees on display in a window a "caricature full of gall and rancor, as only a bored and perspicacious civilization can produce."[712] An image of the lovers of the hated Autrichienne, perhaps? Or a lascivious scene in the Parc aux Cerfs? Virginie realizes she is gazing into the unknown: "this impression will leave her with a strange uneasiness, something that resembles fear."[713] While we are observing Virginie who is observing the caricature at the Palais-Royal, we hear Baudelaire's quiet laughter nearby. "For the phenomena engendered by the fall will become the means for rescue," he adds.[714]

The West dreamed of being encyclopedia and brothel, theater stage and museum, Eden, polytechnic, harem: that dream was realized at the Palais-Royal. But it was a dream that was afraid of itself. It remains with us, suspended.

Mundus Patet

A shadow line separates us from every *ancien régime*: the moment when the single Palais-Royal was dispersed into a myriad of arcades. The galleries of royalty, the "superbes dehors du Palais Cardinal" celebrated by Corneille, were taken over by shops, gambling dens, coffeehouses, brothels:

the city's gossip whirled around the gardens, the Rumors intensified. Everything took place in a quadrangular epiphany, like a final fling before the curtain of character drama came down. There, in that indiscreet swarm, everyone—from the noble libertine to the ignorant rustic—found their allotted place among the numerous folds of the hierarchic fan of courtesans. By the time that Napoleon installed the Council of State at the Palais-Royal, the place was already inhabited by invisible carcasses—and their remains were soon abandoned to an enemy power: the Administration. A few years later, the arcades began, furtively, then frantically, to be opened up to the streets of Paris. Here, the essences of the Palais-Royal, which had now withdrawn into the shade, spread once again into a suffocating and artificial space, multiplied into the city. Benjamin's divining eye would have recognized the entrance to the Hell of the new world, *facilis descensus Averni*: "In ancient Greece, there were places from which it was said you could go down to the underworld.[715] Our waking existence is also a land that, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld, full of places barely visible, from which dreams flow. In the daytime we pass in front of them without suspecting anything, but as soon as we go to sleep we return swiftly toward them, groping in the darkness, and lose ourselves in those dim corridors. By the light of day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness; the arcades (which are galleries that lead into the city's past existence) emerge unnoticed onto the streets. But at night, under the obscure masses of houses, their denser darkness becomes distinct and frightening; and the late-evening pedestrian hurries past—unless, that is, we have encouraged him to wander along that narrow alley." Paris, after the impudent exhibition of the Palais-Royal, experienced its industrial prehistory by rediscovering traces of the *mundus* in the obscurity. As at the foundation of Rome, even before the city had been given a name, in the "round pit" called *mundus* there were placed—says Plutarch—"the first fruits of all that is good according to tradition and necessary according to nature," and in that pit was seen a door to the underworld (*deorum tristium et inferum quasi ianua*); thus the arcades were crowded with the first fruits of trade of varying kinds, under glazed vaults, between the marble tables and wrought iron columns.[716] If the "soil of Rome was scattered with openings to the underworld," Paris opened onto mercenary cavities, where "the Sirens of the gaslights would sing […] on one side, while oil-lamp odalisques offered enticements from the other."[717, 718] But the adventures that

occur here are above all the adventures of objects: mild dominators, immersed in the stagnant air of shop windows, they soon abandon themselves to arbitrary alliances: they discover "secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hairdryer and Venus de Milo, prostheses and letter-writing manuals find themselves here together, after a long separation."[719] In an extract from Cato quoted by Festus, we read: "The *mundus* takes its name from the *mundus* [vault of heaven] that is above us; indeed, as I have managed to learn from those who have entered there, it has a form similar to that of the other *mundus*."[720] For the arcade, the celestial and subterranean vaults do not exist, apart from the milky light that reflects onto the shop displays and onto their alluring windows. The Romans prudently considered that it was not propitious to start a war on one of the three days of the year when the pit of the first-fruits was open. It was said then: *mundus patet* (the world is open). The Parisians of the Restoration and of Louis Philippe regarded the arcades above all to be a practical and lucrative invention for those who wished to *flâner* safe from bad weather, as well as a way of facilitating seduction. For Benjamin they seemed like a collection of oneiric fragments that we could visit at last in a state of wakefulness. Writing about the arcades, he repeated a ritual gesture of the foundation of Rome: having dug the *mundus*, says Plutarch, "each person brought a piece of earth from his own country and threw it in among the first-fruits, mixing everything together."[721] The land of romanticism finally encountered that which it had never known: the Big City.

The great book inspired by the arcades is not, as Benjamin suggests, Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* (however captivating it might be), but Céline's *Mort à crédit*, with its stories about passage des Bérésinas (which was passage Choiseul), where Cèline's mother had her shop. She mended lace, often for customers who were vaporous and opulent, quick to pilfer some article of lace by sleight of hand; she cooked only pasta with butter, so that no smell would impregnate her delicate merchandise; she moved anxiously, on a lame leg, in a suffocating space of scraps and oddments. But Benjamin didn't include *Mort à crédit* among his disparate sources for the *Arcades Project*, and perhaps he didn't read it. Benjamin was immediately defensive and suspicious in relation to Céline: he grouped him, improbably, with Benn and Jung as a representative of "clinical nihilism in literature," to which he intended to devote a lecture.[722] But for Benjamin those names are

held together not so much by “nihilism,” about which everyone talks, as by alarm bells that sound in their writing: shimmering behind Jung’s ponderous and pseudo-scientific prose were erratic, nondialectical, intrusive images. Recognizable in Benn was a sneer at culture that was diametrically opposed to that of Brecht. Benjamin had decided by then to submit to Brecht’s malicious cane—and had no choice but to refuse all others. Finally, in Céline everything was dragged along, from the outset, by a dark current that swept away every momentary island of refuge, every possibility of another story that was not the “petite musique” of gradual disintegration. And yet, if there is a poetics of the arcades, almost a secretion from those highly artificial places, it is that which young Destouches, the child scowling at the back of the shop, had silently absorbed from his mother: “My mother is still working.[723] I remember, in the arcade, when she was younger, the enormous pile of lace to be mended, the fantastic mound that always cluttered up the table—a mountain of stuff to do for just a few francs. It never ended. It was for something to eat. It gave me nightmares, and her as well. It has always remained in my head. Like her, I always have on my table an enormous pile of pending Horror that I’d like to piece together before putting an end to it.”

Historians are unanimous in condemning the ease with which Talleyrand appropriated money in his dealings, obtaining it from the most varied sources. Those large sums were called *douceurs.* His contemporaries were already extremely curious to know the details about his blatant levies. Barras occupies seven pages of his *Mémoires* with a list of “Pourboires diplomatiques et affaires de Talleyrand, prince de Bénévent”—a list he claims to have received from Madame de Staël.[724] Adding together the various figures produces the stately sum of 117,690,000 francs (up to 1815, and excluding the transactions carried out through his wife and his emissaries).

But no historian has managed to show that Talleyrand actually conducted any important negotiation because of the *douceurs* he was about to receive. He obtained money, a lot of money, for things he would have done anyway. In this respect he was following the practice of his friend-and-foe Mirabeau. He knew better than anyone else that history had moved from the world of

the *douceur* to that of *douceurs*. As a result, he felt it appropriate to introduce a change to the well-established diplomatic practice of *douceurs*: he no longer accepted "snuff boxes or gems, as was customary, but only cash."[725] A snuff box, for him, would have been an insult, as well as superfluous. Money, on the other hand, was the instrument that could be most safely concealed, a device that kept the world at a certain distance and blinded it with gold dust, making it temporarily helpless. The age of the *douceur* and that of *douceurs* shared one single rule of crucial importance: Talleyrand spelled it out one day to Vitrolles in order to explain to him why Bourrienne hadn't been appointed as prefect of police: "What do you expect? Bourrienne wasn't there.[726] He was on his way back from Hamburg in a dilapidated carriage; a wheel broke on the outskirts of Paris, and he lost twenty-four hours having it repaired. That's what it means to be a poor devil. So Bourrienne, even if he had a revenue of two hundred thousand *livres*, would still be a poor devil. You see, first and foremost, you mustn't be a poor devil." This was his clear and down-to-earth comment on the words of the Gospel "Unto everyone who hath shall be given."

The *douceurs* then had to vanish, promptly, on the gaming table, in speculative losses, in the perfection of *savoir vivre*. Carême was still his cook. Talleyrand had to auction off his beloved library three times. On the last occasion, the sale of his *Bibliotheca splendidissima* in 3,465 lots brought him 210,000 francs. By then he was sixty-two. On the day of Talleyrand's death the newspapers were full of solemn and vapid comments. Stendhal read them in Marseilles, with irritation. That same evening he hurried off a piece of his own on the death of Talleyrand, "out of impatience … out of indignation at the high-flown phrases."[727] He was "tired to death," and whirling in his mind was the picture of the Spanish dancer Dolores Seral, whom he had just been admiring. But the first sentence of this incomplete and private epitaph scotches all mental sloth, and goes straight to the amiably indecorous truth: "M. de Talleyrand was a man of immense spirit who always found himself short of money."[728]

While Johann Caspar Schmidt was growing up in the provincial obscurity of Germany—and had yet to become Max Stirner, the author of the only book in the West to express the idea of revolt in its chemically pure state—the old Talleyrand talked at length with Dorothée, prior to sleepless nights in which "one thinks of terribly many things."[729] Once he paused to

remember his days at the seminary: “I was so unhappy that I went through the first two years at the seminary without hardly speaking to anyone.[730] I lived alone, in silence, withdrew during periods of recreation to a library where I searched out and devoured the most revolutionary books I could find, feeding on the history of revolt, sedition and devastation in all countries. I was angry at society, and couldn’t understand why, due to the fact of being afflicted by a childhood infirmity, I was condemned not to occupy the natural place that belonged to me.”

Angry at society: they are words that no one would expect from the mouth of Talleyrand. And yet they are confirmed, with subtle variations, by what Talleyrand himself wrote in his *Mémoires*: “At the seminary I felt a sadness which, in a sixteen-year-old, has few comparisons. I established relations with no one. I did nothing except in bad humor. I felt resentful toward my superiors, toward my parents, toward the institutions, and above all toward the power that was given to social conventions to which I found myself obliged to submit.

“I spent three years at Saint-Sulpice, hardly speaking to anyone; people thought I was supercilious, they often reproached me … I was no more than a quiet young man, extremely miserable and inwardly vexed … The library at Saint-Sulpice, endowed by Cardinal de Fleury, was vast and well organized.[731] I spent my days there reading the great historians, the personal lives of statesmen, moralists, a few poets. I devoured accounts of journeys. A new land, the dangers of a storm, the portrayal of a disaster, the description of countries where evidence could be seen of great transformations, sometimes conflicts, all of this strongly attracted me. At times it seemed that something about my situation was less hopeless when I observed these great voyages, these great disasters, descriptions of which filled the writings of modern navigators.” By a clever sleight of hand, Talleyrand had transformed what he had called *revolt* and *sedition* in private conversation into *travels* and *storms* in his public memoirs. Weren’t they, after all, the same thing? Weren’t they perhaps equivalent forms of that “torrent” that prevents us from ever resting on secure ground? About Max Stirner, during his years of adolescence, we have only a few notes from teachers in the records of schools that were certainly not as distinguished as the seminary at Saint-Sulpice. But the whole of *The Ego and Its Own* is impregnated with the memory of long, bitter imaginings of revolt. Stirner and Talleyrand, when they came out into the open, both found themselves

moving forward into a whirling nothingness. Stirner belonged to nothing from the very beginning, and had to represent it in its purity and in its absoluteness; Talleyrand was nothing inasmuch as he had been ousted from his "natural place" which continued to exist for him in the midst of every conflict: a legitimate place, representing an order that could disrupt neither tempest nor revolt. He never fell, however, into the crude ingenuousness of thinking that such order could be identified with any kind of social system. And yet any system was bound to relate to such order. This was a reflection of the mysterious words of Saint Paul: "*Non est enim potestas nisi a Deo*—There is no power that does not come from God."[732] Throughout his life, he was accompanied by a premonition. He sensed, like a faint perfume, that behind the world, behind the fury of its waves, there was the inaccessible "hidden ocean," celestial and terrestrial, perceivable through the distant vibrations of the waves: it was there that the prop of *ṛta* was born, it was there that it continued to rise, day after day, with the appearance of the Dawn.

For Talleyrand, the last negotiating table was his deathbed. He had prepared that deal well in advance, as always; and yet without anyone knowing anything about it. On the death of his wife, now heavily overweight, who had been an alluring adventuress in India, Talleyrand had few words to say: "This much simplifies my position."[733] It was the signal that marked the beginning of his final moves. Cold and impenetrable, as legend dictated, he planned out his slow game over more than three years. One day he remarked casually to Dorothée: " 'I wouldn't mind seeing Abbé Dupanloup … he's our confessor,' he added with a half-serious smile."[734] The abbé was invited a few weeks later to Hôtel Saint-Florentin, and heard the Prince recall what the dying Fénelon had said about Saint-Sulpice ("I know nothing more apostolic, nothing more venerable …").[735] Talleyrand, too, had been educated there, in the years of his dark and dreamy adolescence, when he played "the little Bonaparte": years that he now claimed were the happiest period of his life. With the Church, through Abbé Dupanloup, and Dorothée, who acted here as his minister, the sovereign Talleyrand, in the last four months of his life, negotiated a "formula of reparation." There were two impending obstacles: first, as bishop, he had voted in favor of the impious civil constitution of the clergy and had ordained several constitutional bishops; and second, having been reduced to

the lay communion by a papal brief of Pius VII, he had married, contrary to his unrescinded vow of priestly chastity. Sheets of corrected and recorrected paper passed several times from Hôtel Saint-Florentin to the archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur de Quélen, an uncompromising Breton who, for years, had been asking the Prince to carry out such a gesture. One moment that acquires a meaning of its own in regard to that negotiation was the Prince's last public appearance. "Carried in the arms of two liveried manservants," wearing a tight black frock coat and billowing cravat that made him look like a Merveilleuse from the time of the Directory, the eighty-four-year-old Talleyrand climbed the steps of the Institut to deliver the funeral oration for a second-rank diplomat, Count Reinhard.[736] Once again, he had a clear and definite reason for performing what might have seemed a whimsical act of homage. It would be his "public farewell," carried out in his inimitable style ("C'est du Voltaire! C'est du meilleur Voltaire!" exclaimed Victor Cousin after the oration, gesticulating with an abstracted scholarly excitement).[737] But above all, it would contain a message. With superb clarity, Talleyrand identified the importance in Reinhard's life of theological study, the same that had guided him in his own youth. Launching into a detailed list of the great diplomatic theologians who had glorified the history of France, the Prince let it be understood that the art of diplomacy, when seen from a certain angle, appeared as a branch of that wisdom held by those who know the affairs of God. "I once heard him say that he regarded himself as one of the leading theologians of his time," a faithful observer, Baron von Gagern, had written years before.[738] A paradoxical claim, which now underlined his arguments. A copy of his oration on Reinhard was delivered the following morning to Monseigneur de Quélen and to Abbé Dupanloup.

It is as pointless asking whether Talleyrand's wish to recant was "sincere" as it would be to ask whether the final documents of the Congress of Vienna were "sincere." It is clear that Talleyrand's prime motive behind the negotiation was not religious but ceremonial. In his last years, Talleyrand was aware of the risk he was facing. On his death, he could be refused a religious burial, he could be exposed to the ignominy of a civil funeral. That was the only fear he had. He told his doctor: "Je n'ai qu'une peur, celle des inconvenances—I have only one fear, that of impropriety."[739] Throughout his life, Talleyrand had been scandal itself, but that scandal had always had the power to confer order, to escape from every "*inconvenance*." And now, on his death, that precarious image was in

danger of falling to pieces in the face of the solemn refusal of the Church. In his final act, he would have appeared like someone cast out of the most ancient order. Reading Fénelon, Talleyrand dwelt on one passage: "Let us cast our eye on the Church, namely on that visible society of children of God that has been preserved throughout time: it is the kingdom that has no end.[740] All other powers rise and fall: after having amazed the world, they vanish." Talleyrand wrote in the margin: "*Magnificent!*" His place was in the kingdom that has no end. "I have to do something with regard to Rome, I know," he commented to Dorothée.[741]

But, there again, recantation could also undermine the whole of his life, repudiating it. And here Talleyrand's genius is revealed for the last time. In politics, the timing of acts is more crucial than the acts themselves. The politician is one who has time on his side. And Talleyrand had always held a relationship of brazen faith with the power of time. In his politics, delay was the esoteric weapon. This time, Talleyrand decided to push it to the limit, he decided to make it almost coincide with the limit, which is death itself. "La plupart des choses se font en ne les faisant pas—Most things are done by not being done": this purest Western translation of the *wu wei* of Lao-tzu, Talleyrand's governing maxim, was another secret that he one day confided to von Gagern.[742] This maxim was now given its most rigid application: let matters be done at the final moment before death, and indeed *decide* that it shall be done this way. Already on the point of death, on the penultimate day of his life, Talleyrand refused four times, with worldly civility, to sign his recantation. And he eventually announced that he would sign it the following day, between five and six in the morning. He signed just as six o'clock was striking, after which Dorothée slowly read the two pages of the document, emphasizing every word, in front of eminent witnesses who had been summoned on that May dawn. More than a recantation, it was a document of submission to the authority of the Church, *verba generalia* that wrapped the offending memories in a mantle.

His ordeal was to postpone a gesture, in the throes of death, to the right moment when there was no turning back. Tortured by the "enormous sore" of the anthrax that made it impossible for him to lie on his back, supported under his arms by two people who were alternated every two hours, with his shoulders on a pillow "that was held suspended with ropes from the ceiling," Talleyrand continued to play the gambler: he wagered on the hour of his own death, laying a stake on his last moment of lucidity.[743, 744] Once

again, his final gesture would be a signature. A tiny gesture, but the only one that represents everything. And beside it, as close as possible to his signature ("CHARLES-MAURICE, PRINCE DE TALLEYRAND," the same that had been read at the end of the great treaties of the period), there had to be the seal of an unbroken authority: the signature of death. And so it was: nine hours after he had signed, Talleyrand died. The close proximity of his signature to his death guaranteed him from every attack. When the document reached Rome, the Holy See judged it insufficient. If Talleyrand had survived a few more days, he would have had to face the humiliation of signing again. And to sign a document far more onerous. But now it was too late. Talleyrand could no longer make any correction, he could no longer condemn himself with the words imposed by the Church, which would have compromised the sovereignty of his style. By that time, the Prince had received the sacraments, and had died "in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church," as he was eager to specify in the opening words of his last will and testament. As for the Church itself, it was never made public that the Pope had considered Talleyrand's recantation insufficient. Those papers remained on Gregory XVI's desk, along with his most valued documents. Then they vanished. The maternal Vatican archives have no trace of them.

The theological confrontation, the true *agōnía*, ended with a phrase, with a gesture of staggering insolence and wisdom, which has been reported by a single witness, Prosper de Barante. When Abbé Dupanloup approached the Prince to administer extreme unction, Talleyrand held out the backs of his hands, saying: "Monsieur l'abbé, remember that I am a bishop." As bishop, Talleyrand had already been anointed on his palms many years earlier. Now it was the turn of the other side, so that they were wholly covered by the unction. With that gesture, Talleyrand acknowledged that the blind whim of his parents to enforce a spiritual investiture upon him had, in reality, been more clear-sighted than any desire of his own. Thus he had been compelled to guard the sacred, clothing it in scandal, through "a revolution that has lasted fifty years," as was written in the document he had just signed. But now he offered the backs of his hands for anointing. He who, for many years, had been most likened to the image of the Devil was acknowledging that his soul, at the beginning, had been sold to God.

In raging against Talleyrand, Chateaubriand thought he had outdone every rival when, commenting on his death, he wrote: “M. de Talleyrand, summoned long ago to the supreme tribunal, was contumacious; death sought him at God’s behest, and finally it has found him.[745] To analyze in detail a life that was as rotten as that of M. de La Fayette was wholesome, it would be necessary to face up to certain aversions that I cannot overcome. Scourge-ridden men resemble the carcasses of prostitutes: ulcers have corroded them to such an extent that they cannot be used for dissection.” But somebody else would go even further: Sainte-Beuve. And, true to style, certainly not yielding to the dark clang of invective, but containing himself in the venomous whisper of a postscript: “May God protect us from the *douceur* of corrupt men if they have an important interest at stake.”[746]

Having signed his recantation, “it can be said that Talleyrand died, like the kings of France, in public.”[747] At precisely eight o’clock, Louis Philippe appeared, accompanied by Madame Adélaide. He wore a snuff-colored coat and polished boots, and was holding his hat nervously in his hand. Displaying a somewhat bourgeois (“tant soit peu bourgeois”) outward bearing, he found himself before the Prince, who was dressed in a faded old dressing gown, his forehead broad and expansive.[748] Talleyrand broke the embarrassment by presenting those in the room to the king, in the order required by etiquette, ending with his first valet, Hélie. During the following hours, a small crowd gathered in the salon next to the dying man’s bedroom. There were a number of politicians, “some with powdered heads, others with bald heads, assembled around the blazing fire; their animated conversation, though conducted quietly, through the good taste and sensibility of the person who led it, filled the apartment with its incessant murmur.”[749] Colmache, the Prince’s secretary, noticed Montrond, Talleyrand’s old companion in vice and financial double dealing, seated to one side, sad and alone: “he was sitting in a painful silence, distant from the others, and seemed to be lost in his thoughts, paying no attention to the various details of the scene that was happening around and which, if it were elsewhere, would no doubt have caused him to make one of those bitter and scathing remarks for which he was so feared.”[750] The pretty Duchesse de V. was stretched out on a sofa by the window, “surrounded by a bevy of young beaux—all robber-like and ‘jeune France’—who were kneeling on the carpet beside her or sitting on the cushions of the divan.”[751] As soon as the

murmurs were heard that the Prince had passed away, the rooms became empty: “One would have thought that a flock of crows had taken flight, so great was the precipitation with which each hurried from the hôtel, each in the hope of being first to spread the news in the circle or in the coterie in which he or she happened to be the oracle.”[752] Only those who were truly faithful were left—those who perhaps grieved most for the Prince: the servants. Each kept the order to which he had been accustomed. All at once, Colmache saw “the cook appear punctually at the hour at which for so many years he had been summoned to receive his orders for the day, but this time he was followed by a group of *marmitons* in spotless dress and long knives at their belt.[753] With solemn footsteps each of them approached the foot of the bed and, kneeling with his white cook’s hat in his hand, murmured a short prayer: each sprinkled the corpse with holy water, after which the whole procession withdrew in the same silence with which they had arrived.”

Letter from Saint Petersburg

Monsieur le Chevalier,

I am writing to you after fourteen months in which I have stopped all correspondence. Meanwhile the Neva, which flows in front of me, seems to have swept me even farther away. Behind the taffeta curtains I catch the scent of Kamchatka.

My fury and intransigence—as you well know—coexist always with a native cheer that, beneath the yoke of vain and constant sorrow, is now almost gone. In the evening I am taken by carriage, almost by force, to those same women who used to charm me—and I feel my head overburdened, tired, *flattened* beneath the enormous weight of *nothingness*. I now talk almost entirely to myself, even though such incivility repels me. But I have to do something: so I close myself up and read, with a rapture that makes me shudder, often into the night, when I surprise myself by railing aloud at beings now dead and yet horridly alive. And this lugubrious

practice emerges in my spirit, interferes with all my thoughts and turns them into venom. The most recent of my pleasures, several months ago, was to visit the remains of a mammoth found inside a block of ice, at the mouth of the Lena. Although white bears had partially devoured it, I was able to cherish this indisputable witness of the Flood, this promise of the Fire that pains us and moves us to pity in our anticipation. The ear was still covered with fur. I held my nose close to that flesh five or six times. Never has the most sensual of men inhaled the most exquisite Eastern scent with the sweet pleasure that I felt from the fetid odor of putrefied antediluvian flesh. *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*—What has been believed always, everywhere, by all: in front of that carcass I still sensed the sweet dogma gently resonating, which is the emerald spindle around which my every feeling is spun. Then I went back to talking with the cupboards. In front of the ineffable ridiculousness of modern philosophy, I feel my convictions are like that mammoth intact in its mountain of ice. Like him I let myself be torn apart by the white bears of my solitary days. Tell me just this, mon Chevalier: what is the talk, now, in Paris?

Your
Senator from St. Petersburg

Sainte-Beuve: how the *bon mot* became the *fin mot*, and the *fin mot* proved to be so bitter that, out of decency, people generally avoided saying it and confused it with too many other *mots*. Otherwise the laborious march of life might draw to a halt in desperate paralysis: "There has to be some degree of illusion in the progress of life: when you are too familiar with the *fin mot*, nature removes you from the stage, for the drama would be prevented from going ahead."[754]

"Start off every so often with some *thoughts*, to get them passed: 'We read in Lichtenberg, in Meister, or in Mencius.' "[755] Sainte-Beuve's concern to "get them passed," introducing into his articles those thoughts, those tiny phrases that are his own, but without attributing them to himself, so as not to make them too apparent.

Otherwise they would be too extreme—and too susceptible in their delicate constitution: and they await the reader who is capable of delving

under their skin, of recognizing the hidden vibration. But time has reaped its revenge on this caution by Sainte-Beuve; the eye skims the surface of his writings, there's a certain irritation about his deafness to writers he doesn't know, writers he doesn't wish to acknowledge (this is Proust's claim), and meanwhile we forget to consider his work with the same farsightedness that he is accused of denying to the work of others.

No one had greater respect for the conventions of literary life than Sainte-Beuve. As he lay dying, he was still dictating a few polite lines of reply to an article by Elme-Marie Caro ("What sweetness! what comfort! how many filtered truths that bring light, not without some small remorse!").[756] In no one else did those conventions produce so much venom. Part of this venom went into his posthumous *Cahiers*, bitter accumulations of color. Another part of it, for three years between 1843 and 1845, went to Switzerland, where Juste Olivier's *Revue suisse* published the scurrilous "Chroniques parisiennes," written anonymously by Sainte-Beuve. In any event, the author insinuated wryly, "Paris only gets worried about what is printed in Paris."[757] And so, two weeks after having loyally praised Chateaubriand's *La Vie de Rancé* in the *Revue des deux mondes* ("When it comes to M. de Chateaubriand, the critic is no longer such: he limits himself to collecting flowers along the way and filling his basket with them"), the same pen greeted it with sarcasm in the *Revue suisse*.[758] Sainte-Beuve well recalled how the hollow sounds of Chateaubriand had echoed through his literary youth, how he used to see him beside Madame Récamier, who "each day had a thousand charming inventions for offering him new and fresh praise," of which the melancholy old man never grew tired: "she gathered friends, new admirers on every side.[759] She had us all bound to the feet of his statue with a golden chain." Sainte-Beuve had long been a timid acolyte at the pretty sanctuary of the Abbaye-aux-Bois: the chairs were arranged in circles, like planetary orbits, and Chateaubriand used to enter with the manuscript of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* wrapped in a silk handkerchief. During those years, awed by the fame of the master and by Madame Récamier, the young critic could never have suggested what to him seemed evident: that Chateaubriand didn't have as much to do with religion, with politics, with thought as he had with the corrosive cult of just two, jealous powers: literature and women. And Sainte-Beuve shuddered all the more, since he recognized a similar vocation in himself: but closed up

inside his study, or in a room of the Bibliothèque Mazarine, or lost in the forays of an anonymous Parisian *rôdeur*, though always camouflaged in a studious grisaille, with his housekeeper in the background holding his bag. And this vocation was carried on there for years, without American forests, or solid aristocratic walls, or journeys to the Holy Land and foreign lagoons. His soul, inspired by the prematurely wizened verses of Joseph Delorme, possessed "as its only journey that from Amiens to Paris, with perhaps the occasional excursion to Rouen during vacations from the École de Médicine."[760] But the moment had come when the English newspapers described Chateaubriand as "the good old man." Sainte-Beuve translated it mischievously as "*vieux bonhomme*—simple old soul," adding cruelly: "This means being crowned with laurel and with a nightcap at one and the same time."[761]

La Vie de Rancé had been dictated by Chateaubriand, while sick with gout, from his iron bed in a room in rue du Bac, where the only furniture was a white wooden chest with a broken lock. He mixed quotations from seventeenth-century works, brought to him by a filthy Breton secretary, with his own irrepressible memories, which still poured forth in that further "afterlife," since his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* were now complete and his two faithful assistants, Madame de Chateaubriand and Madame Récamier, were worried their beloved's imagination no longer had anything to which to apply itself. In the face of this spectral and yet sensual delirium, Sainte-Beuve was able to proclaim to the Swiss, with the brutality of a gossip columnist: "Chateaubriand's *Rancé* has been a disappointment."[762] Then he explained: "We who are not as compelled as others to respect, due to the distance from which we are speaking, have to say frankly that this book, which we expected to be so simple and austere, has become, through lack of seriousness and through negligence, a real *bric-à-brac*; the author throws everything into it, jumbles everything, and empties all his cupboards."[763] He continued sardonically: "The most charming, the most extravagant images assail us at every moment and emerge in every corner, from behind every pillar of the cloister, which prompted one witty soul to comment the other day that it was indeed a temptation of Saint Anthony, such are the devils that we meet there, and what pretty devils! At certain points one might think there are passageways running from La Trappe straight to the wings of the Opéra."[764]

Nor were the Trappists very pleased: there was nothing pious about that book written for the glory of their great founder and for the author's penitence. On the contrary, it hurled demons at La Trappe. The secretary of the abbey saw beneath it "the reckless belief in certain slanderous and improbable tales." Abbé Dubois, the austere biographer of Rancé, accused Chateaubriand of perverse obstinacy in rejecting whatever "doesn't fit in with his story."[765] And that was true: *La Vie de Rancé*, Chateaubriand's last foray, has nothing of the edifying biography about it. They are pages that mark a final act of surrender to wild association, a corrupt rummaging among his own memories and a shuffling of shadows, among the debris of time. Their course is abrupt, intemperate, erratic. One finds there the effort of the virtuous *pensum* and the attraction of a flowing monologue. Its prose brings together stones—facts, quotations, and recollections—held together only by moss. With no concern for progression, it passes from undulating softness to cruel sharp perspectives. This book—dedicated to the person who had dared to write "We live to die; God's design, when he gives us the joy of light, is to take it away from us"—expresses a consummate regret for every lost moment of life and leaves a sensation incompatible with tranquillity. It is a farewell that, behind the penitence, seeks out the recollection of sin. Nothing is as troubled as the restlessness and tedium of an old man.

There was one excessively blasphemous superstition to which Chateaubriand paid credence in his book—and it was certainly to this that the secretary of the abbey was referring. It was a story that had been going around for nearly two centuries about the severed head of the Duchesse de Montbazon. She was the lover of the young Rancé and "one of the most beautiful beings ever to be seen."[766] "When dancing, she outshone all the rest," Tallemant assures us, though she wasn't to his taste, since she had "breasts twice the desirable size; and they were fine white and firm, but it was so difficult to hide them."[767] In describing her, Cardinal de Retz wrote that he had "never seen anyone who, in vice, had conserved so little respect for virtue."[768] She arrived at Court at a very young age, with all the frenzy of gallantry and money, which often came together—and then "greed cooled her pleasures without interrupting them."[769] She said that by the age of thirty she would no longer be good for anything and then they'd have to throw her in the river. She was thirty-five at the time of Princess Marie's wedding, and still her beauty dominated all others. Armand Jean le

Bouthillier de Rancé was fourteen years younger, and already an abbé, when he fell in love with her. He had long curly hair, wore an emerald at each wrist, a diamond on his finger, his sword at his side, two pistols on his saddle, with a violet doublet of finest cloth. In a pamphlet "on the true reasons for the conversion of the Abbé de La Trappe," written by Daniel de Larroque to defame Rancé, published in 1685, it was suggested that the turning point in his life dated from the sudden death of Madame de Montbazon: "I have already told you how the Abbé de La Trappe was an amorous man and had various tender relationships.[770] The last of these was with a duchess famous for her beauty, who, having narrowly avoided death while crossing a river, encountered it a few months later. The Abbé, who from time to time went out into the countryside, was there at the very moment when this sudden death occurred. His servants, who were not unaware of his passion, were eager to conceal this sad event from him, which he discovered on his return … He went straight up to the duchess's apartment, where he was permitted to enter at any hour, and instead of the sweetness he expected to enjoy, the first object he saw was a coffin. He realized it was that of his lover on seeing her bloodstained head, which had accidentally fallen from beneath the cloth with which it had been most negligently covered, the head having been severed from the rest of the body in order to save on length and thus to avoid having to make a new coffin longer than the one they had used." Others suggest that Madame de Montbazon's head was then seized by Rancé and that it remained with him through the stages of his conversion and his cloistered existence, always beside him in his cell. Years later, it was claimed that the head of Madame de Montbazon was displayed at La Trappe in the room of Rancé's successors. The skull that appears in portraits of Rancé, among papers, folios, and the crucifix, the skull that encapsulates the silence of the Trappist rule, is—it is said—not an image of death but the treasured fetish of the woman who "had so often bowed over the womb of life."[771]

The impudent Chateaubriand feigns to discuss the credibility of this legend with philological scrupulousness. And he even proposes a plausible solution: that the beheading was carried out not simply because of the meanness of those who wanted to save on a coffin but for reasons of anatomical study. The conclusion, however, is clear: "All poets have accepted Larroque's version, all clergy have rejected it."[772] Here the waters divide: for his very last book, which was supposed to cast him as a penitent,

Chateaubriand reserved the most irreverent revelation: he would stand, in this case, and forever, on the side of those who believe more in legend than in religion, and of those for whom religion itself is, most of all, a legend. At last he was admitting that he was, first and foremost, a writer. Before saying farewell, he deposited the head of Madame de Montbazon in the cell of the Trappist reformer. This time it was indeed his last piece of *bric-à-brac.* Then he closed up his cupboards.

"What have you been doing over these forty years?"

The lips of the Trappist opened for an instant to break the silence: "*Annos aeternos in mente habui*—I had in my mind the years of eternity."

M. DE SAINT-LOUIS: I have always been a soldier. I still had my regiment, which served under Turenne, when I first went to La Trappe: it was in my part of the country, smothered by hills and ponds, in the old forest of Le Perche. Large solitary leaves slid over the water like on a pavement of lead. I had never come across such an absence of life, except at the Escorial. I had been told that Rancé, our Monsieur de La Trappe, was under threat from enemies of his reform that paid honor to silence. I offered him my services to defend him. He didn't refuse, he didn't accept, he didn't even smile. Further time went by before I sold my regiment to the eldest son of Villacerf and went back to Rancé to ask to stay at La Trappe. He gave me lodging in a place he'd had built outside the wall of the abbey. One day he spoke the words that would determine my conduct for over thirty years: "Make a rule for yourself, as mild as you wish, provided you are faithful to it." Once he also told me, with a hint of the gentleman who had loved Madame de Montbazon, the most beautiful woman of our time and the most shameless in vice, that I, with my long experience of the world, already knew the humiliations that awaited me: for the people next to whom we live in the midst of the world are the instruments chosen by God to humiliate us, so that in one single instant of that life one often suffers the mortifications that a monk encounters over the years. I despaired for a long time, in my lodging at the margins of the true rule. But one day, in that silence, I saw the world pass by in a gust of wind. It was light and insubstantial, empty. The rule had done its work. And then I was happy once more with my weapons,

in a desolate garrison at the ends of the earth, hearing again the song of soldiers and tumble of casks, waiting for the noise to end.

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